

prkrub002: Riverborne.docx

by Ruby Parker

Submission date: 13- Aug- 2018 07:40PM (UTC+0200)

Submission ID: 989715996

File name: Assignments_b7216d46- 59df - 4f e6- b1d0-
8246e0008006_Riverborne.docx (143.73K)

Word count: 42717

Character count: 195571

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Ruby Parker
210 St Martini Gardens
Queen Victoria Road
Cape Town, 8001
rubyparker26@gmail.com

RIVERBORNE

by Ruby Parker

Fire to bind

Water to blend

Air to break

And Earth to rend

- The four principles of witchery

CHAPTER 1–THE FOX

There was something eerie about the empty riverbed, Ghost had always thought. As he stood in the middle of the stream of stones, he imagined a sudden tide rushing down and sweeping him away. Still, it was beautiful in a barren way he supposed. The white rocks stood out against the surrounding green like the bare bones of the valley.

The villagers were wary of the woods on the other side of the river and avoided it as far as they could. Maeve seemed to approve of their superstition on the grounds that it discouraged unwanted visitors. However, from time to time the village boys would dare each other to cross the riverbed to catch a glimpse of the wood witch's cottage. Indeed, most of Ghost's interaction with the village children was limited to such clandestine encounters.

A sudden bark made him look up to see Burr bounding towards him from the opposite bank, with Nella close behind him. He smiled as her freckled face came into view; she was

the closest he had to a friend in the world.

“Slow down, you silly mutt!”

The dog ran up to Ghost, who bent down to scratch his shaggy grey fur.

Nella caught up with them. “Here you are,” she said by way of greeting. Her cheeks were nearly as red as her hair, which was wild from the chase. They must’ve run all the way down from the cottage. “Maeve is looking for you.”

“What for?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” she said with a deliberate air of mystery.

They made their way back up the track that led to the cottage, with Nella taking the lead. Before long, Burr fell behind to sniff at the wild grass that bordered the path.

“What is it, Nella?” Ghost asked again as they waited for the dog to finish.

Nella’s resolve seemed to give way to her excitement. “Maeve is making a telling fire,” she confessed.

Ghost frowned. “I thought your aunt disliked divination? She always says that the future is a book best left unread.”

“She was tossing and turning all night. Then this morning she woke up saying ‘the fire will reveal the source’ ... or something like that.”

“The source of what? Her bad dreams?”

But Nella only shrugged. Though of an age with Ghost, she was still new to witchery, and cared more about the ‘how’ than the ‘why’.

Burr completed his inspection and they resumed walking. After a brief hike they rounded a bend in the road and the cottage came into view: a small stone cabin with a heavy thatched roof that crouched in the shadows of the surrounding trees.

As they entered the cottage, the strong herbal scent of rosemary washed over them. The smell came from the fireplace, where sprigs of the plant were smoking on the coals. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the rafters above the hearth in a ghostly garland.

Maeve was at her work table in the kitchen, which was covered in the usual collection of pots and jars. “There you are boy,” she said, looking up through her mane of grizzled curls.

“Morning, Maeve.”

The old woman straightened up, sending her necklace of iron nails rattling. The mark of a witch, Ghost had never seen her without it. “I need you and Nella to go gather some mugwort. You know where it grows?”

Ghost nodded. He had lived in the cottage all of his thirteen years and knew the surrounding woods like his back garden.

“Good.” Maeve handed him a woven basket from beneath the table. “And don’t dawdle. I don’t like the look of the sky,” she added, turning to stare out of the window.

#

The woods behind the cottage were under autumn’s spell. The rustle of dead leaves followed Ghost and Nella as they made their way down the forest path. Not much light filtered through the thinning canopy above; the patches of sky that were visible were grey and uninviting. Ghost squinted up at the clouds overhead. “We should hurry,” he told the girl, but she didn’t respond. “Nella!”

She started at the sound of her name. “Yes?”

“It’s going to start raining soon.”

“It is?” she seemed to become aware of her surroundings. “Oh.”

“Where were you just now?”

“I was thinking about the fire,” she admitted. “Aren’t you curious what we’ll see?”

Her hazel eyes searched his face, but he turned away to hide his discomfort.

“We have enough problems in the here and now.”

Nella rolled her eyes. “You sound just like Aunt Maeve.”

After a while the trees began to thin and a carpet of withered grass unfolded before them, livened in place by lingering wildflowers. They waded into the meadow in search of the mugwort plant amongst the knee-high grass.

“Over here,” Ghost called after some time. He had found the herb hiding in a tangle of bushes.

Nella took a small pair of shears from the front of her apron. “You sure this is it?” she asked.

Ghost nodded. “See how the leaves are green in front and silver at the back?”

Nella cut a sprig of leaves from the feathery bush and gave it to him. “What do you feel?” she asked.

“Now you sound like your aunt.”

She gave him a flat look. “We need to be sure.”

Ghost sighed. “Very well.”

He closed his eyes, running his fingers over the leaves, feeling their downy texture, smelling the herbal aroma as they crumpled in his hand...

“I feel strong,” he said slowly, “as though I could run a great distance or defeat many foes... I feel free, as though I could soar up through the clouds to the heavens and beyond...”

Ghost opened his eyes. He blinked several times as though emerging from a dark

room into daylight.

Nella was smiling at him. “For someone who doesn’t enjoy witchery, you sure are good at it,” she teased.

Ghost shrugged awkwardly. “We should hurry,” he said.

#

A light rain began falling as the pair headed back like the patter of hundreds of tiny feet following them down the path. A hush fell over the forest, the only sound was the steady drip of the leaves, until –

Ghost stopped abruptly.

“What is it?” Nella asked.

“I thought I heard something,” he said, straining to listen.

A cry echoed through the empty forest.

“It’s coming from over there,” Nella said. She took off into the trees before Ghost had time to protest.

“Nella, wait!”

He followed the girl through the damp undergrowth, the wet ground muffling the sound of their steps. After a short climb, they reached the top of a rise and the source of the noise became visible: in the hollow below, a fox was caught with its foot in a snare. The animal whimpered as it wrestled to break free of the rope.

Two boys stood watching it struggle. The one took obvious delight in the sight. “Go on!” he taunted the fox, his freckled face alive with excitement. The other boy stood watching placidly, his features unreadable. He was taller than his sandy-haired companion and clearly the elder of the two.

The scene incensed Nella. “What do you think you’re doing?” she called down to the pair. She scrambled down the ridge, leaving Ghost no choice but to follow.

“Who are *you*?” the ginger boy asked.

Nella straightened herself. “I am Finella Fullbrook and you are trespassing in these woods.”

“Fullbrook? That old drunk who lives down by the river? You family of his?” the boy asked shrewdly.

Nella flushed but did not deny it. Ghost stepped forward to stand next to her.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Never you mind,” Nella said defensively.

“I know who he is,” the tall boy said. His dark eyes studied Ghost, taking in his silver hair and bone-white skin. “He’s that bastard boy, who lives at the witch’s cottage.” He paused for a reaction. “Tell me,” he continued when Ghost did not respond, “Is it true that your father was one of those northern savages?”

Ghost felt his face turn warm. “My parents don’t concern you.”

“What concerns me is that a monster like you is left free to roam the forest.”

The fox whimpered behind them, forgotten by his tormentors for the moment.

“You’re the monster,” Nella countered. “Look what you did to that poor animal.”

“What are you? His protector?” the sandy-haired boy sneered.

Ghost stepped forward. “I don’t need a protector,” he said through clenched teeth.

Nella grabbed the pair of shears from her apron and the boys jumped back in surprise. She rolled her eyes. “Move over,” she said and shoved past them.

She edged towards the animal, who shied away at her approach. Realising what the

girl intended, Ghost put two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. The fox turned to look at him, distracted by the sound. While its attention was diverted, Nella grabbed the string and cut it in one swift motion. It took a moment for the fox to realise that it was free. It gave Nella a brief look of gratitude before disappearing into the bushes.

“How heroic,” the tall boy said dryly.

Nella rounded on him, scissors in hand. “Get out,” she hissed.

“Or what?”

“Or else I’ll tell my mistress, the witch of these woods, that you trespassed on her lands,” Ghost said coolly.

The boy stared at him, his lips pressed together tightly. “Let’s go,” he told his companion. The sandy-haired boy leered at Nella and Ghost, before following his friend.

Nella watched them retreat with a scowl. “What a pair of brutes.” She looked at Ghost and the anger left her face. “We should head home,” she said gently. “Maeve will wonder what’s keeping us.”

Ghost nodded and began the climb back up the hill.

“You shouldn’t listen to them,” Nella started again when they reached the path.

“What they said was true,” Ghost said, staring at the muddy ground. “My father probably was Were...” Though no-one in the valley could say for sure. His mother had died in childbirth, before she could name his father. Before she could even name her newborn son... Maeve’s nickname for him, ‘Little Ghost’, has had to do ever since.

“So what? I have some Were blood, too. All witches do,” the girl persisted.

It’s not the same, he wanted to say. But Nella wouldn’t understand. With her red hair and tawny-green eyes, her ancestry was distant. Whereas Ghost... with his pale features there

was no hiding what he was. No matter how badly he wanted to.

#

“Where have you been?” Maeve asked as they entered the cottage half an hour later. She was in the kitchen, studying the contents of her medicine box. Burr scampered over to greet them, but Ghost ignored the dog.

“Never mind,” she said when no answer was forthcoming. “A rider came from Hillside Farm while you were away. One of the boys has fallen ill.”

“Can we come with you?” Nella asked.

“I will send for you if there is need,” Maeve said vaguely. Now that they were older, the witch sometimes allowed them to accompany her on her rounds. It was good experience for her apprentices-in-training, as she like to call them. But Ghost secretly missed the days where he was left in the care of Mistress Miller, the local innkeeper. At least at the Inn, he could stay in the kitchen and avoid talking to anyone...

Maeve closed the small wooden chest and placed it in her satchel. “I should return before nightfall,” she continued. “Don’t open that door for anyone after dark. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Maeve,” they chorused.

“One hears strange stories...” she trailed off. “Well, I best be going before the rain starts again. Be good.” She gave them a final look of warning, lingering on her niece, before heading out into the gathering grey.

CHAPTER 2–THE MAIDEN IN THE STORM

The rain returned that afternoon, accompanied by a fierce wind that whipped the wooden chimes outside the cottage into a frantic song. It howled down the chimney, where Nella and Ghost sat huddled in front of the hearth. Burr lay sleeping at their feet, oblivious to the storm brewing outside. Nella snapped her book shut and the dog woke with a start.

“Why did the boy have to get sick on today of all days?” she said with a sigh.

“It's very inconsiderate of him,” Ghost agreed with mock earnestness.

Nella rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Maeve might still be back?” he suggested half-heartedly.

Nella got up and walked over to the kitchen window. The bleak light cast a ghostly glow over her features as she stared outside. “She won't hurry home in this weather,” she said with a shiver and drew her woolen shawl closer around her shoulders.

“Should I add more wood to the fire?” Ghost asked.

“Yes,” she said absently, gazing through the rain-spattered window.

He got up to fetch more logs from the wood pile, but a cry made him freeze.

“Wait!” Nella walked over to the hearth and reached behind the mantle.

“What are you doing?” Ghost asked as she appeared to feel her way along the inside of the ledge.

“I’m looking for something,” she replied in a strained voice.

Ghost frowned. “What for?” he asked, although he suspected that he knew the answer.

Nella withdrew her hand and held up a small silver key in a triumphant gesture.

Ghost’s scowl deepened. “Nella, I know what you’re thinking and the answer is no. Your aunt would be furious—”

“My aunt doesn’t need to find out.”

“She will know.”

Nella scoffed. “Don’t be silly. She’s not omniscient, although she would like us to think so...”

Ghost grasped for further objections. “Do you even know the binding?”

“It can’t be that difficult.”

She knelt down next to the prone figure of the dog, who had gone back to sleep. “Get up, Burr.” He gave a grunt of annoyance at this latest disturbance but did not budge. “Move, you silly mutt,” she said and tugged at the rug beneath him. With a heavy sigh, Burr got up and slunk away in search of somewhere quiet to finish his nap.

When the dog had gone, Nella threw back the rug to reveal a wooden trapdoor set in the floor below. Ghost watched in silence as she unlocked the door and slowly lifted the

hatch. A set of steep stone steps appeared in the opening, leading into the darkness below.

Nella rose gracefully and took a candle from a table beside one of the chairs.

“Coming?” she asked, but started down the stairs before he could reply. Ghost hesitated for a moment, then followed the wavering light into the gloom.

The stairs led down to the herb cellar, a cave-like room that swallowed the light of the candle in its murky depths. The walls were lined with shelves, upon which rows of glass jars gleamed dully beneath a layer of dust. Each bore a yellowing label, written in Maeve’s spidery hand.

“Valerian...Vervain...” Nella murmured softly as she searched the shelves. “Here it is,” she exclaimed after a time, and held up a glass bottle to study its contents. “This should be enough.”

“What is that?” Ghost asked, curious in spite of himself.

Nella handed him the jar, which was filled with a dry, bark-like substance.

“Wormwood. It’s essence is supposed to induce visions.”

Ghost handed it back to Nella, who looked at him expectantly. “So, are you going to help me or not?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“My aunt will assume you were involved anyway.”

“I thought you said she wouldn’t find out?” he asked wryly, but she simply continued to stare at him.

Ghost sighed. Since Nella had come to stay with them two years ago, he had quickly learnt that it was better just to let her have her own way. “Very well.”

Nella placed a few sprigs of mugwort in a kettle over the fire. When the brew was ready, she poured herself a cup. It was yellow and gave off a strong, grassy smell.

“Want some?”

Ghost quickly shook his head. He watched as the girl took a cautionary sip. “How is it?”

“Not bad. It’s almost sweet.” She took another, deeper gulp.

“What now?” he asked once she had drained the whole cup.

“We need to burn the wormwood...”

Nella took a large pinch from the jar. “Fire to bind, water to blend,” she recited as she sprinkled it over the coals.

Air to break, and earth to rend, Ghost finished the rhyme in his head. It was used to teach the four principles of witchery: fire could destroy the casing of a herb or plant, releasing the essence within, to be inhaled or joined into a potion with water. The last two elements were used to undo such bindings, though Ghost was yet to learn how...

Nella leaned over the fire, her eyes closed against the smoke. She took a deep breath, then sat back on her haunches. Seconds passed but nothing seemed to happen.

“Do you feel anything?” Ghost asked.

She opened her eyes, a small frown appearing between them. “No.”

“Try again.”

She leaned forward again and made an upward motion with her hands, as though waving the smoke to her face.

Ghost was about to ask if she felt anything when her eyes shot open. “Nella?”

But she did not seem to hear him. Her whole body had gone rigid. She stared out in

front of her, the firelight dancing in her eyes. She sat like that for a moment, looking into the flames. Then her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed to the floor, her limbs twitching as though fending off an invisible attacker.

“Nella!” Ghost lunged at the girl, pulling her away from the hearth. Burr came running down the stairs, barking at the commotion.

Ghost had seen a seizure before while assisting Maeve. He knew there was not much that he could do but wait for it to pass. He cradled Nella’s head in his lap, murmuring reassurances as the convulsions shook her. Eventually, her breathing slowed and her body grew slack like a rag doll.

“There,” Ghost said, stroking her hair. Her forehead was clammy with sweat. “That’s better.”

He knew the best thing he could do was to let her rest. So he made up a pallet in his usual spot in front of the hearth. Gently, he laid Nella down on the straw mattress and covered her with blankets. Then he collapsed onto the pallet next to her, breathing a sigh of relief. Before long his breathing began to slow, as he followed his friend into an uneasy sleep.

#

Ghost was woken by the cold, or so he thought. The fire had gone out while he slept, plunging the cottage into icy darkness. He lay still for a while, trying to gather the strength to go fetch more firewood. He was about to get up, when he heard it: a strange mewling sound coming from somewhere beyond the cottage... At first he thought it was the wind, but everything was quiet outside; the storm must’ve died down while they were asleep.

It couldn’t have been his imagination, though – Burr had heard it, too. The dog sat upright at the end of the mattress, staring at the back door. When it started up again, he gave a

short bark and ran to the kitchen. Ghost scrambled up after him.

“Hush,” he told the dog. “I’m trying to listen.” But all was quiet again. He hesitated for a moment, thinking of Maeve’s warning. But then he remembered what Nella said: *She’s not omniscient, although she would like us to think so...*

He reached for the latch before he lost his nerve, and opened the door by a crack. It was strangely light outside, despite the clouds covering most of the sky. The moon must be near to full.

“Hello,” Ghost said, tentatively. “Is anyone out there?”

Silence, followed by another whine.

The door flew open as Burr forced his way out, nearly knocking Ghost off his feet. “Burr!” he called. “Come back here!” But it was too late – the dog had already vanished into the nearby trees.

Ghost swore and backed into the cottage. He found his boots where he had left them on the floor and quickly pulled them on. He would have to go after the blasted creature before it got lost, or worse...

It had stopped raining outside, but water still dripped from the canopy above. Ghost kept his hood down though, scared that it would obscure his vision.

“Burr!” he called as he searched through the trees. “Come here, you stupid dog.” He held his lantern high, sending the shadows scattering before him.

And then the light passed over something that wasn’t a tree. Something that shone darkly in the moonlight... Ghost stopped in his tracks: curled up by the roots of a large oak tree lay a young woman. She was dressed in a white silk robe, her long, dark hair wrapped around her like a midnight cloak. She blinked up at the lantern in confusion; even in the half-

light Ghost could see she was exceedingly beautiful.

“Miss, what are you doing here?” he asked in concern.

She sat up slowly, as though she had just emerged from a long sleep. “Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re in the Witch’s Wood, miss. Just outside of Riverborne.”

“Riverborne,” she repeated. “Yes...”

As Ghost got over the initial shock of the woman’s appearance, he became concerned for her welfare. “You don’t look well, miss,” he said. “My mistress’s cottage is just over the way. Let me take you.”

He offered her his hand, but she declined, rising shakily to her feet. Ghost had to resist the urge to rush forward to steady her. Instead, he gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“This way,” he said and began back up the path.

At the edge of the trees she halted, staring at the cottage. “I know this place...” she said with a sense of dawning recognition. “This is the witch’s cottage.”

“Yes. My mistress is away for the night. But don’t worry, I can brew you something to see you right.”

She looked at him for a long moment, her eyes growing more focused. Then she nodded her assent.

#

Inside, the cottage was not much warmer than the damp forest. Ghost led the young woman straight to the hearth, where Nella lay sleeping on the floor.

“She’s not well,” he explained quickly. “Nothing serious. She just needs rest.”

He busied himself making the fire, while the woman settled into one of the carved chairs. “There,” he said a few minutes later as the fire crackled to life.

Ghost turned to his guest, who was looking around the cottage. When she caught him staring, she gave a faint smile.

“Thank you for rescuing me.”

Ghost felt his face grow warm. “It was nothing, miss,” he said to the hearth rug.

“Please, call me Wynna.”

Ghost dared a glance up at her face; she looked thin-cheeked and pale, as though she was recovering from a recent illness.

He swallowed. “If you don’t mind me asking, mi- Wynna. How did you end up here? No-one comes to the woods after dark.”

She was quiet for a moment, a faraway look in her eyes. “I was on my way to Riverborne, when I got caught in the storm. I took shelter in the trees, and I must’ve fallen asleep somehow... The next thing I remember is waking to you standing over me.”

“You’re from the village?” Ghost asked, taken aback. He had never seen her around there before. He definitely would’ve remembered a face like her’s...

Wynna smiled as if she knew what he was thinking. “Once. Although it has been many years since I’ve been home... Tell me, is Master Fairbridge still the mayor?”

“No, miss. Old Fairbridge died years ago. Tristan Blackthorn is mayor now.”

A strange emotion passed across her face like a shadow. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. There was a brief silence, broken by a moan as Nella twisted in her sleep. “Your sister is a heavy sleeper,” the woman observed.

“Nella’s not my sister,” Ghost corrected her. “She’s Maeve – my mistress’s – great-

niece. She came to live here a few years ago, after her mother died of the wasting sickness.”

“I see...” Ghost felt her dark eyes linger on his face.

“Can I make you some tea?” he asked to forestall any further questions. Not that he needed to explain his own presence at the cottage - he was hardly the first babe left on the witch’s doorstep over the years.

“That won’t be necessary. I’m perfectly content just sitting here by the fire.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Now please get some rest. I have troubled you enough for the night.”

“Can I at least make you a pallet?” he offered, but she shook her head. “I have slept my fill.”

“Goodnight, then,” Ghost said uncertainly. He settled back down on the pallet next to the unconscious Nella. The last thing he saw before falling asleep was the profile of the maiden, staring into the flames.

CHAPTER 3—MARKET DAY

The sun was already in the sky when Ghost awoke the next morning. Nella didn't stir as he got up, still recovering from her ordeal the night before. He looked for Wynna inside the cottage, but there was no sign of her. Perhaps she had set out early for the village, not wishing to disturb him. But what could be so urgent that she would leave without saying goodbye?

Her absence made the encounter feel unreal somehow, as though he had dreamt the whole thing. Yet there were his boots by the door, caked in mud from his midnight excursion...

He found Burr curled up outside the back door. "There you are, you silly creature!" he exclaimed in relief. The dog gave him an accusatory look, as though it had been Ghost's fault that he spent the night out in the cold.

It was a brilliant day outside with barely a cloud left in the sky, yet evidence of last night's storm was littered everywhere. Ghost inspected the exterior of the cottage to check for any damage. Luckily, the only casualties seemed to have been Maeve's wooden chimes,

which had been torn down from the trees by the wind. As he knelt over the pieces, the old witch came walking up the river path. She paused on the threshold, casting an appraising eye over the scene.

“I see you survived the storm,” she said gruffly.

“We did,” Ghost said. “How is the Hillside boy?”

“He’ll be fine.” Maeve put her satchel down with a grunt of relief. “His fever broke early this morning.” Ghost picked up his mistress’s bag and followed her inside.

“Where is my niece?” she asked, before spotting her on the floor. “Is she having a lie-in? Wake up sleepy bones,” Maeve said, gently prodding Nella with her foot. But the girl did not move. “Stop playing the fool, girl. We have work to do.”

“She’s not playing the fool,” Ghost said weakly.

“What do you mean?”

He took a deep breath, then started to relate the events of the previous evening. Maeve listened without interrupting, her face growing harder as he continued. When he reached the part where Nella collapsed, she finally exploded.

“Fool of a child! Of course, she forgot the vervain...”

Maeve bent over her unconscious niece, lifting her eyelids and feeling her pulse. When she finished her examination, she straightened up, rubbing her back.

“Will she be alright?” Ghost asked, suddenly nervous.

“She’ll be fine. Just needs to sleep it off. Come help me carry her up to the bedroom.”

#

“I’m sorry,” Ghost said to Maeve when they were back downstairs.

“For what?”

“I should’ve stopped her...”

The witch snorted. “I would’ve liked to see you try. As for that one,” she nudged her head in the direction of the loft. “Hopefully this will teach her not to mess with powers above her understanding.”

Ghost nodded glumly, staring at his feet.

“If you’re so desperate for punishment, boy, you can always help me clean the yard. The place is a mess after the storm.”

The rest of the day was spent gathering broken branches into a pile, and helping Maeve restring her wind chimes. Nella finally awoke later that afternoon, but Maeve kept Ghost so busy that he could only sneak up to talk to her after dinner.

Nella sat up in bed, looking pale but alert. “How are you feeling?” Ghost asked her.

“Well enough, but don’t tell my aunt. I’m surprised she hasn’t given me proper telling-off by now.”

“She seems to think you’ve seen the error of your ways.”

The girl scoffed. “Not very likely.”

“Why?” Ghost asked, lowering his voice. “Did you see something in the fire?”

“I don’t think so... Although, I did have a strange dream. There was this beautiful woman in the cottage, dressed all in white like a priestess.”

“That wasn’t a dream,” Ghost said quickly and filled her in on what happened after she had passed out.

“Did you tell my aunt?” Nella asked when he finished the story.

Ghost hesitated. “I didn’t really get a chance to. And she was already angry about the fire...”

“Good thinking,” Nella agreed. But somehow her approval made him doubt the wisdom of his decision.

#

They had breakfast early the next morning, as Maeve wanted to go down to the village for supplies. Ghost had almost finished his porridge when Nella finally came downstairs. She was wearing her favourite green dress and a bright expression. Unlike Ghost, Nella loved market day – it was a chance to get out of the cottage and see some of her old friends from the village.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Maeve asked as her niece entered the kitchen.

Nella’s smile flickered. “Aren’t we going to the village?”

“If by ‘we’ you mean Ghost and I, then yes. You, on the other hand, are not leaving this house until you finish these chores,” Maeve said and handed her a slip of parchment.

Nella scanned the list, looking horrified. “But this will take all day!”

“Then you’d better get started.”

Nella opened her mouth to protest, but seemed to think better of it. Instead, she turned around and marched back up the stairs, presumably to go change.

Ghost had a sudden rush of inspiration. “I’ll stay home with Nella,” he volunteered, trying to sound off-hand. “To keep an eye on her.”

The witch gave him a knowing look. “I need you to help me carry the supplies,” was all she said. But Ghost could not help but feel that he was being punished, too.

#

Nella and Burr watched them leave from the front door with identical expressions of longing.

“Hurry up, boy,” Maeve urged as they made their way down the path. “We want to get there before all of the good turnips are gone...”

As they reached the riverbed, they could see smoke rising in the distance. They headed towards its source, following a dirt track that eventually broadened into a road. After a while, houses began to appear on either side of them; whitewashed cottages that hid behind wild hedges or peeked through clumps of trees. The plots became smaller and smaller as they continued, until they reached a cluster of buildings.

Riverborne was not a big village by any standards, consisting of a few dozen families. But today it was bustling with activity, most of it centred on the village green, where a patchwork of stalls were spread out. Wagons full of produce stood next to tables laden with an abundance of goods, from baskets of bread to colourful spices; they even passed a whole pig roasting on a spit.

Despite the clear skies, there was a lingering chill in the air. Ghost kept his hood up to mask his shock of white hair, but most of the villagers were too preoccupied with their shopping to pay much attention to him. Maeve headed straight for a yellow-draped stand down the first row. It was manned by a tall, balding man with a friendly expression.

“Morning, Albert,” Maeve greeted him.

“Morning, Maeve. What can I do for you?”

The witch started to rattle off a list of vegetables, pausing only to scold Albert on his choice of turnips. When her basket was full, it was the farmer’s turn to tax her.

“Now that I have you here...” he began, and proceeded to describe a rash that had recently appeared on a mysterious body part. Ghost sighed on his mistress’s behalf.

Whenever they came to the village, the witch would invariably be stopped by someone looking for advice. Maeve liked to joke that she should set up a stall on the village green. However, most of her patrons preferred to visit the cottage, away from the prying eyes of their neighbours.

“Let’s see it then,” Maeve said to the man, sounding resigned.

Ghost took this as his cue to make himself scarce. He wandered idly through the market, pausing occasionally to sniff at a hot pie or stare longingly at a custard tart. Many of the poorer villagers couldn’t afford to pay the wood witch and traded goods for her services instead. They got by for the most part, but there was hardly ever anything to spare for treats.

Ghost soon grew tired of browsing and began to look for his mistress. Ghost scanned the crowd, searching for a familiar face... And then he saw one: pale and lovely, framed by a curtain of dark hair.

“Wynna!” Ghost exclaimed. He pushed through the throng of people, but when he reached the spot where he had seen her, she was gone. He spun around, just in time to the edge of a white robe disappearing around a nearby house.

He rushed up the alley but the young woman was nowhere in sight.

“Wynna!” he called again.

He sprinted up the street, rounded another bend – and almost ran headlong into the two boys coming from the other side.

The freckled one smiled as he recognised Ghost. “Look what we have here, Alain,” he said to his dark-haired companion. “It’s the witch’s pet.”

Ghost reflexively looked over his shoulder but the street behind him was empty. The movement did not go unnoticed.

“What’s the matter, monster? Not so brave outside your mistress’s yard.”

Ghost looked the boy straight in the eye. “Must be easy to be brave, when you always have your friend with you to finish the fights you start.”

The ginger boy bristled, but his companion smiled.

“And where’s your friend today?” he asked, black eyes gleaming. “What a pretty pair you make: the Wereborn bastard and the daughter of the village drunk.”

Ghost stepped towards him. “Keep your mouth off her!”

“Or what?”

But before he could answer, a man approached from behind the boys. Tall with peaked black hair, he had a lean build that spoke of years of physical labour.

“What’s going on here? Alain?”

“This is the boy I told you about, father. The one from the woods.”

The man turned to look at Ghost. His face was handsome like his son’s, but his eyes were green instead of black.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Ghost.”

“Ghost?” the man repeated mockingly and the boys sniggered. “Listen, Ghost, if you threaten my son again, I will make sure you never set foot in this village for the rest of your life. Do you understand me?”

Ghost clenched his fists in silent anger. It wasn’t fair – the boys had started the fight. He was only standing up for himself.

The man took a step closer. “I said, do you-” but he cut off, looking over Ghost’s shoulder.

“Here you are,” a familiar voice said from behind him. Maeve had appeared around the corner, cradling her basket of supplies. “Tristan,” she nodded to the man, who took a step back.

“Maeve.”

“I didn’t see you at the market today,” the witch said with the shrewd look she got whenever she suspected Nella or Ghost of mischief.

“I had other business to attend to...”

“Solving children’s disputes. Must keep you very busy. Though one wonders if it’s the best use of your time.”

Tristan clenched his jaw. “It’s my responsibility as major to protect the village.”

“Against what? A twelve-year-old boy?” Maeve gave a dry laugh. “What a heroic campaign. They should erect a statue of you on the village green.”

“We both know that is no ordinary child,” Tristan spat, pointing at Ghost.

“Ordinary or not, he is under my protection. And you would do well to remember it.”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed at the unspoken threat. “Careful, Maeve,” he said in a low voice. “Sooner or later one of your strays are going to turn around and bite you...” He placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Come, Alain.”

The boy gave Ghost a menacing look before they disappeared down the road, his sandy-haired friend hurrying after them.

#

The journey home was quiet. Once they left the cluster of buildings, they met hardly anyone on the road. The only sound was the wind moving through the trees, gathering leaves for autumn’s cloak. Maeve seemed undisturbed, but Ghost could not help going over their

altercation with Tristan. He kept shooting sidelong glances at the witch, unsure of how to broach the subject.

“Out with it, boy,” she said after a while.

Ghost looked over his shoulder but there was no-one around to overhear them.

“Was it wise?” he asked. “To anger Mayor Blackthorn.”

Maeve raised a bushy eyebrow.

“I’m grateful you stood up for me,” he added hastily. “But the village council already don’t like you very much-”

“Those old fools,” she said with a dismissive wave. “They say I give their women folk ‘ideas’.”

“Exactly.” Ghost said. “You don’t want to give them any more reasons to dislike you...”

Maeve smiled down at him. “I appreciate your concern, Ghost. But I’m old enough and ugly enough to take care of myself.”

Ghost returned her smile, still not completely reassured.

CHAPTER 4—MIST AND FROST

Ghost dreamt he was in a twilight forest. Dark trees penned him in on either side, herding him towards an unknown end. He took yet another turn and saw a flash of white on the path ahead of him. He followed the glow along the twists and turns, but it remained just out of reach. The dream shifted and he realised he was the one being pursued. He forced his legs to carry him faster, but felt his unknown pursuer closing in-

Ghost sat upright in his pallet, breathing as though he had really been running. Under the coverings, his skin was damp with sweat. He settled back onto the mattress but it was too late for sleep. With a sigh, he got out of bed. Everything was quiet upstairs, so he decided to go for a walk.

Ghost was used to being by himself. Before Nella joined their humble household, his closest companion had been Burr. The dog followed him outside, eager to go exploring with his master. It was after sunrise, but a thin mist still hung in the air, rising like steam from the

thawing earth. A coat of frost glistened on the dry autumn grass, turning straw into silver.

The pair had barely set out when they were met by a tall youth coming up the river path. Ghost recognised him immediately by his thatch of straw-coloured hair.

“Morning Ghost,” the young man wheezed, clutching his side.

“Morning Angus,” Ghost replied, pleasantly surprised by the older boy’s appearance. Angus’s mother owned the village inn and was a good friend of Maeve’s. Her family had always been kind to him – unlike most of their neighbours.

“Is your mistress home?” Angus asked when he had caught his breath.

“Why? Is something the matter?” Ghost asked, suddenly concerned.

Angus hesitated, scratching one of the pimples on his cheek. “It’s best that I tell her in person...”

Ghost shrugged. “As you wish.”

They found Maeve in the kitchen, readying a pot of tea. “Angus,” she greeted the youth. “What brings you here so early?”

“It’s Tristan Blackthorn, ma’am...”

Maeve’s expression soured like curdled milk. “What about him?”

“He’s – well – dead.”

“Dead!” the witch exclaimed. “That can’t be possible. I saw him just yesterday–”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am, but I found him myself. Passed out behind the inn’s stables – dead as a rat in a bucket of water.”

Nella came running down the stairs. “Who’s dead?” she asked, a note of fear in her voice.

“Tristan Blackthorn,” Ghost answered before the others could.

Maeve began moving swiftly around the kitchen, stuffing her satchel with pots and jars. “Has the family been informed?” she asked Angus over her shoulder.

“I don’t think so,” the youth said. “Ma thought you should be summoned first. As a precaution.”

She nodded grimly. “Do you have any suspicions of the cause?” The unspoken question hung in the air.

“Exposure, it looks like. Must’ve been out there all night...”

Maeve frowned. “Had he been drinking?” she asked carefully.

“He was at the taproom yesterday until last call,” Angus confirmed. “But he looked well enough to find his way home. Otherwise I would’ve put him up in a room,” he added defensively.

The old witch pursed her lips, looking thoughtful for a moment. Then her gaze fell on Nella and Ghost and her eyes regained focus. “You two—” she began, but her niece forestalled her.

“Can we come with? We promise we won’t get in the way.”

“Very well,” Maeve said, clearly in too much of a hurry to argue. “But you’ll do as I say, or else you’re coming straight home.”

#

By the time they reached the village, it was beginning to show signs of life – shutters were being thrown open and chimneys gushed smoke as breakfast fires were lit all over. The Queen’s Arms stood in the centre of town and had the distinction of being the only three-storey building in the valley. It had been a manor house once, in the days when the village still had a Lord. But the last of the line had died two decades ago, and the village hadn’t seen

a tax collector in more than half as long. The inn did not have many visitors - just the same peddlers and traders every season - and most of its coin came from the locals who frequented its taproom.

Angus led them around the inn's stables to the back door. He knocked twice, glancing over his shoulder nervously. The door opened, revealing a handsome, dark-haired woman in an apron.

"Maeve, thank the gods," Elaine Miller said. "Inside, quickly," she ushered them through the door, before hastily closing it behind them. "He's this way."

The woman led them through the kitchen to a small entrance hall, dominated by a heavy oak staircase.

"The boy said he found the body behind the stables?" Maeve asked as they climbed the steps.

Elaine nodded. "He was tossing out the swill, when he found him. Poor thing, it was a horrible shock." She led them down a long passageway, pausing in front of the final door. "In there."

Ghost stared at the door with morbid curiosity. He had seen dead bodies before with Maeve on her rounds, but this was Tristan Blackthorn. Could he really be dead? He had seen him only yesterday...

"I will need some time alone with him," Maeve said in a voice that brooked no argument.

"Of course," Elaine agreed. "Come children," she gestured to Nella and Ghost. "Let's go find you some breakfast."

As they walked back down the corridor, Ghost heard the door behind them open with

a groan and click shut again.

#

Elaine led Nella and Ghost back down to the kitchen, where she fixed them a breakfast of sausages and eggs. The innkeeper seemed calm on the surface, but she kept glancing at the door to the entrance hall. Ghost and Nella had nearly cleared their plates, when they heard the telltale wheezing on the staircase.

“Wait here,” Elaine said before hurrying out.

Nella and Ghost exchanged a glance. As one they rose to listen at the door.

“...exposure,” they heard Maeve say in a hushed voice.

“This early in the season?”

“...unusual, but no sign of wrongdoing-”

“...his face? Looks as if he’d seen his worst fear made flesh...”

Maeve grumbled in what sounded like agreement.

“...notify the family?”

“Angus has already left.”

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Ghost and Nella scrambled back to the table.

A moment later the kitchen door opened.

“Time to go,” Maeve announced.

As they entered the hall, the front door swung open. Angus came in, accompanied by a small, plain-faced woman, clinging to his arm for support. Alain trailed after, looking even paler than usual. The boy didn’t seem to see Ghost, as he followed his mother and Angus up the stairs.

“Come on,” Maeve said, steering them towards the door. “Let’s give the family some

privacy.”

As they walked away, a cry of grief echoed from above.

#

The funeral took place the following day. A pyre was erected next to the riverbed, its white stones muddied by the recent rains. Almost everyone in the village had shown up in their finery. They could all have been going to a harvest festival if it wasn't for the presence of iron – most wore a single nail or a coin around their necks, while others carried horseshoes. Old Mrs Fields had even brought a soot-blackened kettle along for good measure. It was an ancient superstition that Ghost did not quite understand.

It was the same with the salt gift: every family brought a bag of salt to the funeral, which was strewn around the pyre at the end of the ceremony. Most villagers couldn't tell you why – but would still insist that it was very important. Ghost had asked Maeve about it once and she had said the meaning of some rituals become lost over time, but that did not make them meaningless... Whatever that meant. The witch liked to speak in riddles, but Ghost sometimes wondered if it was just a clever way to say that she didn't know the answer.

As they watched, a man stepped forward from the half-moon of the crowd. He had a long, gaunt face, softened somewhat by a plume of white hair. Ghost recognised him as Tobias Catcher, a member of the village council. Ceremonies of this kind were usually presided over by the mayor, as Riverborne was too small to merit a temple or priests. The village council must've assumed authority until a new leader could be elected...

The villagers fell silent as Tobias Catcher raised his arms to greet them. Nella, who had been chatting to two girls a few rows back, slipped silently into place next to Ghost.

“Friends, we are gathered here on this sombre occasion to commemorate the life of

Tristan Blackthorn,” he began in a sonorous voice. “Tristan was born and raised in Riverborne. As a young man, he left the village to begin his apprenticeship with a master smith in Topsfield. It was there that he met his wife, Livia...”

Ghost looked at the widow, who stood at the edge of the crowd. She did not seem to hear her name, staring into the distance as though in a kind of trance. Beside her stood her son, handsome and dark next to his mousy-haired mother.

“They don’t look anything alike,” Ghost thought aloud.

“That’s cause they’re not,” Nella leaned in to whisper. “I was talking to Judith and Alys earlier. They said Alain was adopted as a babe. He’s not their natural son...”

Ghost was stunned by the revelation. He opened his mouth to reply, but Maeve shushed them with a look.

He turned to stare at the boy instead. All this time he had been mocking Ghost, when he had been abandoned just like him. The only difference was that Alain had found a home with a village family. No-one wanted to adopt the Wereborn bastard...

There was a sudden silence and Ghost realised the man must’ve finished his speech. Alain took his mother by one arm and the bucket of salt in the other. Slowly, they began to walk around the pyre, sprinkling the salt in their wake.

“We release you, Tristan Blackthorn,” they chanted. “Go forth, into the beyond.”

They did not stop until a solid band of crystals encircled the pyre like a ring of frost. Alain led his mother back to the crowd, where they watched Tobias Catcher light the pyre.

As Ghost observed the boy staring into the flames, he had a sudden recollection of Wynna. He wondered where the young woman was, if she was all right. He decided that he would ask Nella to see what she could learn from her friends in the village.

#

After the ceremony, most of the crowd drifted over to the Queen's Arms. Ghost had never seen the inn's taproom so full before. He, Nella and Maeve had to squeeze themselves into a table at the back of the room. Ghost sank low in his chair, trying to make himself as small as possible, but no-one seemed to notice him through the haze of pipe smoke. He wasn't really sure what they were doing there. After all, it's not as if they were friends or family of the deceased. Tristan had been less than kind to him the one time they met and he could not pretend that he regretted his passing.

The mood was much lighter than at the funeral, owing in most part to the popularity of Elaine's ale. People were soon drinking toasts to Tristan and exchanging stories about him. Before long, Maeve went to fetch another pint at the bar, but was waylaid by Albert again. Her seat was soon taken by Nella's friends Judith and Alys. Big for her age, Judith had a domineering manner to match. Compared to her sister, Alys looked anxious and small – the brown field mouse to Judith's ginger cat.

"What are you hiding back here for?" Judith asked, plunking herself down next to Ghost.

"We're not hiding, we're observing," Nella said regally.

Judith looked around the room, seeming unimpressed. "Never mind that," she said, lowering her voice. "Who do you think did it?"

Nella frowned. "Did what?"

"You know – offed Tristan Blackthorn."

"Judith!" Alys said, her blue eyes large with apprehension. "You can't go around saying things like that! You know what mother says about spreading stories..."

“It’s not a story if it’s true!”

“The girl’s right,” said a voice from behind Ghost. It belonged to a thin, greying man in the corner. Nella stiffened at the sight of him like a hare who had spotted a wolf.

“What makes you say that?” Judith asked, oblivious to her friend’s reaction.

“I saw him the night he died,” the man said, staring into his pint. From the rheumy look in his eyes, Ghost guessed it was not his first. “He was nowhere near passing out. Besides, who ever heard of a strapping man like that dying of a little cold?” He shook his head as if in disgust at their gullibility.

“There were no signs of wrongdoing,” Ghost said, venturing a challenge. He didn’t know why, but something about the man put his hackles up.

“Not of the ordinary kind. But it was written all over his face,” the man paused as if for dramatic effect. “It was witchery, I tell you. And of the darkest kind...”

“And who exactly are you accusing, Fineas Fullbrook?” Maeve appeared behind them, her hands on her hips. At the mention of the man’s name, Ghost looked at Nella. She was staring at him now with suppressed dislike.

“I ain’t accusing no-one. Just making an observation,” Fineas continued, taking a long sip of his ale.

“In future, you best keep your observations to yourself.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Is that right?”

Elaine fluttered over, looking harassed. “Is there a problem?” she asked Maeve.

“I’d say. Your friend here don’t want people to know the truth,” Fineas said, so loudly that people from the nearby tables turned to look at them.

But Elaine was having none of it. “Fineas Fullbrook, I would ask you not to raise your

voice in my establishment.” The man glowered at her, but knew better than to argue with the innkeeper. He withdrew into his corner, muttering into his ale.

Elaine turned to Maeve apologetically. “Can I find you a different table?”

But the witch shook her head. “I think it is time to leave. Come,” she said to Nella and Ghost, who rose obediently. As they made way their way to the door, Ghost could feel the prick of the villagers’ eyes on his back, following them out like a swarm of stinging flies.

CHAPTER 5—A VISION IN THE DARK

Nella was distant the rest of the day, wrapped in her thoughts like a heavy cloak. After dinner, she retired early and didn't join them by the hearth. Come winter, they would all sleep down by the fire – Maeve and Burr engaging in a nightly battle of snores. But for now, she still shared a bed with her aunt up in the loft.

When Nella wasn't at breakfast the next morning, Ghost thought he knew where she was. He found her down by the riverbank, skipping stones into the shallow brown water. Burr trotted over and she scratched his head absent-mindedly.

“How did you know I'd be here?” she asked, without looking up.

Ghost shrugged. “It's where I come when I want to be alone.”

He sat down next to her on a patch of grass, damp with morning dew.

“So that man was—”

“My father.”

Ghost didn't know what to say. “I've never met him before,” he said stupidly.

“He keeps to himself, for the most part,” Nella said, picking at the grass. “Actually, I suspect Maeve warned him to stay away from me...”

“That’s why he ignored you yesterday?”

She nodded, still scratching in the ground. Ghost studied her face – she didn’t look anything like the rheumy-eyed man they’d seen at the inn. She must take after her mother, who was a great beauty... He thought of Alain Blackthorn, of who the inverse was true.

Nella gave him a sideways look. “And you? What’s on your mind?”

“I’m just thinking about that Blackthorn boy.”

“What about him?”

“He’s such a hypocrite!” Ghost burst out. “Calling me a bastard, when Tristan wasn’t even his real father...”

Nella looked thoughtful. “Maeve says sometimes we despise that in others which we can’t accept in ourselves.” Ghost remained quiet so she nudged him in the ribs. “Like how she lectures me about the evils of gossip, but is always whispering with the other old women.”

He smiled, glad of her renewed cheer. “We better head back,” he said, rising to his feet. “We don’t want to miss our lesson.”

#

Back at the cottage, Maeve was waiting for them in the kitchen. “I thought we’d do something fun today,” she said. The table before her was decked out with the paraphernalia of witchery: jars of herbs, a mortar and pestle, a small silver knife...

“Aren’t we supposed to have a history lesson?” Ghost asked, and Nella shot him a dirty look.

“History won’t have changed by tomorrow. Today, we have urgent matters of the heart before us.” Ghost turned to Nella, who looked equally confused. “Now, as you know, a wood witch is responsible for the bodily health of her village,” Maeve continued.

“Personally, I have always been of the belief that that includes the heart.”

“Someone in the village has a heart problem?” Ghost asked.

“Of a kind,” Maeve smiled. “Mildred Greenbanks has asked my help to attract a husband.”

Nella sniggered. “She doesn’t need witchery for that. She just needs to get rid of her moustache,” she muttered to Ghost.

Maeve gave her a flat look. “Laugh all you want, Finella. But to be loved is basic human need. It’s as important for our wellbeing as food or shelter.”

Nella still looked sceptical. “It seems wrong, though, making someone fall in love against their will.”

“We’re not manufacturing love – that is a power beyond witchery. We’re just... tipping the odds in Mildred’s favour. Like a binding for luck. In fact, it has the same three ingredients at its base.” Now that Maeve had reached the particulars, she had her niece’s full attention. “Each witch has her own variation, but I like to add cinnamon for passion and yarrow for longevity...”

They spent next few hours preparing and brewing the mixture. When the binding was complete, Nella chose a pretty crystal bottle to decant it in.

Mildred came to collect it later that afternoon. A pale young woman with a heavy brow, she blushed when Maeve gave her the bottle. She brought a basket of apples in exchange, so they had apple and raisin pudding for dessert that night.

#

The next few days at the cottage were unusually quiet. They had no more visitors after Mildred, and the rest of the week was devoted to lessons and chores. Maeve spent most of her free time out smoking on the porch. That was where Ghost found her one evening, sucking on a pipe as she did when she was thinking. Wisps of white smoke curled from her, drifting off into the night.

“Things have been quiet around here,” Ghost observed, hoping to goad her into conversation.

The witch inclined her head, staring into the darkness. Trees flanked the cottage to the west, obscuring the view of the valley below.

“Do you – do you think it’s because of what Fineas said? About witchery?”

“It’s possible,” Maeve admitted. “Though one would hope people know better than to listen to the ravings of a drunkard.”

“But what if he’s not raving?”

Maeve raised a brow but he continued before he lost his nerve. “Could it have been witchery that killed Tristan Blackthorn?”

Maeve was silent for a while. “If it was, then it’s beyond anything I’ve encountered before. Then again, there are types of witchery that I know little about...”

“Like what?” Ghost asked, surprised. He had always thought of Maeve as an inexhaustible source of knowledge.

“The Were skin witches, for example...”

“I had heard they had the ability to transform into animals,” Ghost said carefully. When it came to the Northern clansman, Maeve was usually quick to change the subject.

“An exaggeration. Although, if you see them in battle it’s easy to see where the legends come from.”

“You’ve seen Were warriors in battle?” Ghost asked, in awe.

“I’ve seen many things in my day,” the witch said mysteriously. “Now, you’d better go inside before you catch a cold.”

Ghost drifted back to the kitchen, where Nella was cleaning up after dinner. “What were you and aunt Maeve talking about?” she asked, giving him a sidelong glance.

So he told her all that the witch had revealed. She didn’t seem surprised that her aunt had seen Were clansmen in action. “It was probably during the Prince’s War, twenty years ago.”

“Yes, but the closest battle took place at Highgard-”

“They would’ve needed healers,” Nella said sagely. “Anyways, what did she say about Tristan?”

“She admitted that his death might not have been natural.”

“But how is that possible? Maeve is the only witch in the valley...”

Ghost shrugged his shoulders. He was as confused as she was.

#

Ghost was still pondering the mystery of Tristan’s death when he retired to bed that night. Who would have had a grudge against the mayor? And what could he possibly have done to deserve such a frosty end? He knew that Tristan was a bully like his son, but still...

He was about to drift off, when he was woken by a commotion upstairs.

“Ghost!”

Maeve appeared at the top of the stairs. “Bring the bucket!” she ordered.

He obeyed without hesitation, lugging the bucket from the kitchen up the stairs. Burr raced ahead of him, his tail beating in excitement. Once he reached the loft, Ghost saw what all the fuss was about. Nella lay in a tangle of blankets, twisting as though trying to break free of imaginary bonds.

“I can’t seem to wake her,” Maeve said. “But this should do the trick.”

Ghost handed her the bucket, which she unceremoniously emptied over her niece. Nella’s eyes fluttered open at the shock of the cold water. She looked confused until she spotted Maeve with the empty vessel. “What’s happening?”

“You had a nightmare,” Ghost said uncertainly.

Nella frowned, as though trying to recall the details. “I dreamt I was in a house, somewhere in the village. That woman Livia was there - she was sleeping. Someone else was there, too...” she paused. “A young woman, pale with long black hair. She looked on as frost began to spread all over Livia. Her breath came out as fog until – until it stopped...”

She looked up at Maeve, her eyes wide with fear. “What does it mean?”

Maeve did not immediately respond. “It could be a vision,” she said slowly, as though weighing each word.

“A vision? Then it was real?” Nella asked, sitting up in alarm.

“Perhaps. Or it could simply have been a bad dream...”

“But we have to warn her! We have to go down there and – and–”

“And say what? You had a dream?” Maeve asked gently. “Children have nightmares all the time.”

“This was different, though. It was real! I know it.”

“That may be. It is impossible to say...” Nella looked mutinous, so Maeve continued.

“If you still feel as strongly in the morning, we can go see Livia right away. Now, let me go fix you a sleeping tonic.”

The girl nodded reluctantly. They listened as Maeve’s footsteps retreated downstairs. When she was gone, Nella turned to Ghost.

“You know who the other woman in the vision was? It was your maiden – the one from the woods.”

Ghost shook his head in denial. “That’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

But he could not think of a good enough reason. He had only met Wynna once, after all. He didn’t really know her – or what she capable of... Just because she was beautiful, did not mean that she was good. She could be a witch for all he knew. But what kind of witch had the power to kill at will?

“Why didn’t you tell Maeve?” he whispered.

“I didn’t know how to explain how I knew who she was...”

Before he could answer, though, they heard her coming back up the steps.

“Thank you, Ghost. I’m sure I can manage from here,” the witch said.

Ghost nodded. He shared a last, anxious look with Nella before heading downstairs. Back in his pallet, Ghost was unable to fall asleep. He kept seeing Wynna standing over the widow’s body, her face as beautiful and cold as autumn frost.

#

Nella was still adamant the next morning, so they set out for the village after breakfast . The day was cold and grey, with a promise of rain in the air. Nella was quiet on the walk over, chewing her lip in a pensive way. Ghost thought she was probably rehearsing what she was

going to say to Livia. Even though she insisted on the veracity of her vision, he knew she must have some doubts. He remembered how his midnight encounter with Wynna had felt like a dream the next day.

He still couldn't believe that the young woman would really hurt anyone. She had looked so innocent and frail when he found her beneath that tree. Although, her sudden disappearance the next morning had been strange...

The Blackthorn residence lay down a leafy lane, just outside the village. The large stone structure was built and paid for by Livia's dowry, if village gossip was to be believed. The daughter of a rich blacksmith from Topsfield, the widow had a superior attitude that made her unpopular with her neighbours.

When they arrived at the house, a small crowd was already gathered outside, a woman's wailing audible from inside. Maeve immediately pushed her way through the group of people. But Nella hung back, looking scared.

Ghost searched the crowd and saw a familiar ginger head. "Judith!" he called. At the sound of her name, the girl spun around. She spotted them at the back and nudged her sister.

"What's going on?" he asked, as they came walking over.

"Livia Blackthorn is dead," Judith said in an excited whisper. "They found her this morning, frozen in her bed." Nella turned to Ghost, her face bleached of colour.

"Who found her?" he asked.

"Her son, Alain. He had to break the door down – apparently it was locked from the inside."

"From inside?" Ghost asked, distractedly. "How is that possible?"

Judith shrugged. "That's what I heard."

“Poor boy, he’s an orphan now...” Alys said. Ghost followed her gaze over his shoulder to where Alain sat across the street. He had his arms wrapped around his legs, and was staring at his feet. He looked so forlorn that Ghost felt compelled to go over to him, but regretted it as soon as he did.

“What do you want?” the boy asked as he approached.

“I-I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Alain nodded moodily and looked back at his feet. Ghost took courage from his silence. “Look, you haven’t seen anyone strange around lately? A young woman, with long black hair?”

The boy glared up at him, eyes narrowed in dislike. “Why are you talking to me? Do you think we have some bond, now that we’re both orphans? Think we’re going to be best friends?”

Ghost was taken aback by his hefty reaction. “I just thought it was important, that’s all. Sorry for bothering you.” He turned away.

“Wait,” Alain called after him. “I’ve seen her. This woman.”

“When?”

“That day at the market. And then again, at the funeral. I remember, because she kept staring at me...”

“Thank you,” Ghost said. The boy nodded, lapsing back into moody silence.

Across the street, Judith was still going on about the circumstances of Livia’s death. “Frozen inside her home. It’s not natural... That man Fineas was right. Something dark is at work here!”

Fortunately, Maeve soon came to rescue them from the pair. They followed the witch

down the tree-lined lane that eventually became the main road. On the way, they passed small clusters of villagers, who whispered and stared as they walked by.

“Come along,” Maeve said, ignoring the looks. She led them to the back of the Queen’s Arms, where she left them by the stables. “Wait here.” She walked to the back of the inn and knocked on the kitchen door. Elaine’s head popped out and soon the two were hunched together in whispered conversation.

Nella wandered off into the stable while the women talked and Ghost followed after her. It was not a big structure, comprising of only six stalls, only one of which was occupied. Not many people in the village could afford a horse, and those that did kept big, working animals. But this horse was different – smaller and sleeker with a glossy brown coat. Built for riding, not the plough.

Nella held out her hand, and the animal nosed it obediently. She stroked its face, tracing the white fleck on its brow.

“It wasn’t your fault, Nella,” Ghost began and the girl’s mouth tightened. “Even if you’d warned Livia, it wouldn’t have saved her.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because we’re dealing with powers here that are beyond any of us! How do you guard against something you don’t understand?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But we have to figure it out. Before anyone else gets hurt...”

Back in the courtyard, Maeve and Elaine had finished their conversation.

CHAPTER 6—ESSENCE OF WORMWOOD

It began to rain on the way back from the village, and they arrived at the cottage, cold and dripping wet. Ghost went about making a fire, while Maeve and Nella hung up their outer clothes to dry. Together, they nestled around the fireplace, soaking up the warmth.

Maeve had put a kettle on and soon they each had a steaming mug of chamomile tea before them. “For warmth... and the shock.”

When they had drained their cups, Maeve turned to her niece. “I owe you an apology girl,” she began. “I should not have doubted you.”

But Nella shook her head. “You had no way of knowing the dream was real. I mean, I still don’t understand how...”

“As to that, one can only speculate,” Maeve said. “My best guess is that it’s a memory of what you saw in the fire, coming back to you like ripples rising to the surface of a pond.”

Nella looked thoughtful. “So there may be more?”

“Only you can tell us that. Do you remember anything else from that night? Anything that could help us identify the other woman in your vision?”

Nella shook her head, but her eyes darted to Ghost. Maeve did not miss the exchange. “Ghost? Is there anything you would like to share?”

“I asked around the village... Alain Blackthorn has seen her.” Ghost paused and took a deep breath. “And so have I.” Then he launched into the tale of finding the maiden in the woods and bringing her home, only to find she had vanished the next morning. And how he thought he had glimpsed her again the next day at the market.

“Thank you for telling me, Ghost,” Maeve said after he had finished. She looked very tired all of a sudden, as if her age had finally caught up with her.

“So you think it’s true, then? That she has something to do with the deaths?”

“I think she has everything to do with them,” the witch said slowly. They waited for her to continue. “Nella, do you remember what herb you burnt in the fire that night?”

“Wormwood,” the girl answered instantly. “But what—”

Maeve held up a hand. “And what are the properties of wormwood?” she went on.

“The essence of wormwood can induce powerful visions...”

Maeve nodded. “Yes, but there’s another use... Think.”

Ghost frowned, straining to think back to his lessons. And then it came to him. “It can be used to call up spirits of the dead.”

The colour drained from Nella’s face. “That’s not possible!”

“It makes sense,” Ghost said. “Spirits are said to possess powers that witches don’t, like controlling the elements... Or moving through walls,” he added, thinking of the locked bedroom door.

“But you met her! You spoke to her. How could you not know she was... she was...”

“She didn’t let me touch her,” Ghost went on. “She refused my offer of food and drink...”

He turned to Maeve, who nodded grimly, as though her suspicions were confirmed.

“But what can we do?” Nella asked, sounding panicked. “How do we get rid of a – a spirit?”

“That I do not know. But there are those that do...” the witch mused. “I’ve heard talk of a woman, who lives in the Wildwood near Lynden. They say she is a bone witch...”

“A bone witch?” Nella asked, but Maeve held up her hand again.

“That’s enough questions for now. I need to think.”

#

Night came early to the cottage, carried on the back of dark clouds. Maeve had dozed off in her chair after spending most of the afternoon immersed in a cloud of pipe smoke. Ghost envied the witch – he didn’t think he would ever be able to sleep again... Nella sat next to her aunt, pretending to read. But she kept starting at the slightest noise from outside. A sudden knock on the door almost sent her jumping out of her chair. Burr leapt off the hearthrug and scampered to the entrance way.

“Who is it?” Ghost asked, trying his best not to sound afraid.

“It’s Angus Miller,” came the muffled response.

Ghost breathed a sigh of relief and went to open the door. The youth stood on the threshold, his hooded face lit from below by a lantern.

“Come in,” Ghost said but Angus hesitated, glancing over his shoulder.

Maeve appeared next to him, looking alert. “What’s happened?” she asked.

“My ma sent me to warn you. It’s the villagers, ma’am! They think you’re responsible for these attacks. A group of them are on their way...”

Ghost looked at Maeve in disbelief, but the old witch nodded grimly, as though she had been expecting something like this to happen.

“Thanks for the warning, Angus.” She made to close the door but the youth still hovered on the threshold. “Will you be alright?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve faced worse than a mob of superstitious farmers.”

Angus nodded uncertainly. “The Four protect you,” he said and vanished back into the night.

Maeve closed the door with a snap. “Right,” she said, turning to Nella and Ghost. “We need to act quickly...” They followed her back to the hearth, where she threw back the rug to reveal the trapdoor beneath. She bent down and unlocked the cellar with a key she kept around her neck.

“In there,” she ordered the pair of them. “You too,” she told Burr, who was sniffing at the opening. Ghost took the dog by the scruff of his neck and led him downstairs, with Nella close behind him. He turned around when he saw the trapdoor closing above them.

“Wait!” he cried. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

The witch shook her head. “Elaine will come to get you when it’s safe. You are not to leave before. Understood?”

“But they’ll arrest you, or worse...” Nella said. “You need to run!”

Maeve gave a snort of contempt. “Only the guilty run away. Now listen carefully, we don’t have much time. I need you to go to the Wildwood and find the bone witch. She will know how to stop these attacks.”

“What about you?” Ghost asked, echoing Nella’s concern.

“Nevermind me. It’s your responsibility to protect the village - if only from their own stupidity...”

Before either of them could respond there was a knock on the door. “Witch,” a voice boomed across the hall. Maeve slammed the trapdoor down and they were hurled in darkness. There was the sound of the lock sliding and footsteps hurrying to the door. Nella and Ghost stood listening on the stairs, not daring to move.

“Baine,” Maeve said with mock surprise. “What brings you to my door at this hour? An obstruction of the bowel again?”

There was the sound of coarse laughter.

“I see you brought Farrow and Croft for moral support.”

“I have men at the back door, too, so don’t even think about making a run for it,” Baine said.

“Believe me, at my age that’s the last thing I would think of. Now, is there a reason why you have my house surrounded?”

“We’re here to arrest you.”

“On whose authority? I don’t see any members of the village council here?”

There was a pause. “They’re taking too long. Bunch of overcautious fools.”

“So I’m to be abducted. How thrilling.”

They heard loud footsteps as Baine presumably forced his way into the cottage.

“Where are your brats?”

“Somewhere you’ll never find them,” Maeve said.

“We’ll see about that. Farrow, you take upstairs. Croft, keep an eye on the witch

while I look down here.” There were loud thuds as furniture was upended and cupboards were emptied of their contents.

“How is you wife doing, Croft?” Maeve asked in a conversational tone. “Any more mysterious bruises?”

“Shut it, witch!”

Before long, there came a muffled cry from upstairs. “They’re not down here either,” Baine answered. “The little brats must’ve escaped into the woods. Farrow and Croft, take the witch back to the village. The rest of you, with me.”

There was the sound of thunderous footsteps and then the door slammed shut with a terrible finality.

#

There was an echoing silence upstairs. Ghost suddenly became aware of how dark it was in the cellar. Burr whimpered, expressing what they were all feeling. Ghost reached down and found the dog’s head; his warm fur felt reassuring real in the overwhelming darkness.

“What now?” Nella asked from above him.

“Now we wait,” Ghost said.

With one hand on Burr’s neck, he felt his way along the rough wall. When he reached the bottom of the steps, he sat down on the cellar floor. The cold spread up through him from the stone surface, turning his insides to ice.

“Where are you?” Nella asked, stumbling on the final step.

“Here,” he held out his hand and she found it in the dark. He pulled her down next to him.

“What do you think they’re going to do to aunt Maeve?” she asked in a small voice,

as though almost too scared to express the thought.

“I’m not sure... Lock her up?”

“It’s so unfair!” Nella burst out. “She had nothing to do with the attacks. If anyone should be locked up, it’s me...”

Ghost squeezed her hand. “It’s not your fault. If I had told Maeve about Wynna sooner, Alain’s mother might still be alive...”

“So what do we do now?” Nella asked. “How do we fix this?”

Ghost considered their predicament: Maeve had made it clear that she wouldn’t run from the law. But with the witch behind bars, there was no-one to protect the village from supernatural harm...

“Maeve gave us a mission,” he said finally. “We need to find this bone witch - she’s the only one who can help us save the village.”

“What about my aunt?”

“We’ll find a way to free her, too...” Ghost said with confidence that he did not really feel. But it seemed to convince Nella. She sidled up to him, resting her head on his shoulder. They fell asleep that way, their hands clasped together as though in prayer.

#

Ghost was woken by a noise from above. His first thought was that the men had returned to look for them. He held his breath, listening in the dark.

“Nella? Ghost?” a familiar voice called.

“Elaine!” he cried out in relief, forgetting his manners. “We’re down here!”

The trapdoor rattled as the woman tried to open it. “It’s locked!”

“There’s a key behind the mantle!” Nella said, sitting up.

They heard Elaine move around upstairs and then the lock slid open. Her face appeared above them, lit by the glow of a lantern. Ghost lifted a hand, shielding his eyes from the brightness. “Come,” she said.

They emerged from the cellar, blinking away the darkness. By the light in the window, Ghost could tell that it was close to dawn.

“How long were we down there?” he asked.

“Only a few hours.”

“Where is my aunt?” Nella asked. “What did they do to her?”

“Your aunt is safe,” Elaine said. “She’s being held at the inn.”

“At the inn?” Ghost asked, confused.

“Come, we must hurry. I’ll explain on the way.” They followed her to the door, where they stopped to take their cloaks.

“Wait!” Nella said as they were about to leave. She ran back to the kitchen and returned with Maeve’s satchel, containing her medicine kit. “Just in case.”

“How did Maeve end up at the inn?” Ghost asked again as they started down the river path. Burr trotted ahead of them, a shadow in the morning fog.

“The village council was very angry at Baine and his men. They saw their actions as an affront to their authority. But they seemed unsure what to do with Maeve, so I suggested we keep her at the inn until we could send for a magistrate from Highgard. Both groups agreed, on the condition that Baine could station some of his men as guards.”

“But Highgard is so far away! It will take him days to get here. What if they get impatient?”

Elaine hesitated. “Your aunt still has friends in the village. We will look out for her, I

promise.”

They reached the bottom of the path and waded through the brown water, careful not to slip on the stones beneath. Angus was waiting on the other side of the river in a cart, drawn by the horse they had seen stabled at the inn the day before.

Nella balked at the sight. “Where are you taking us?”

“I have a son in Topsfield,” Elaine said. “You will be safe there until things have... settled down.”

“We can’t go! We can’t leave Maeve!”

“What can you do for her here?” Elaine asked gently. “Those men who are looking for you, they mean to use you against her. Force a confession. The best thing you can do for your aunt is to lie low until all of this blows over...”

Nella opened her mouth to protest but Ghost nudged her in the ribs. A thought had just occurred to him. “Mistress Miller is right. Our best course is to go with Angus,” he said, trying to communicate with his eyes that he had a plan.

Nella frowned at him but seemed to get the hint. “Fine,” she said. “We’ll go with him.”

Elaine smiled sadly and reached out to smooth her hair. “It’s what your aunt would’ve wanted.”

CHAPTER 7—CAMPFIRE TALES

As they approached the wagon, Angus nodded in greeting. He looked nervous, fiddling with the reigns as though eager to depart. They followed Elaine to the back of the cart, where two large oak barrels were stored.

“In there,” she said. “The road should be empty this early. But just in case...”

“What about Burr?” Ghost asked. “Can he come with?”

“I’ll take good care of him,” Elaine reassured him, patting the dog’s head.

It was a tight fit inside the barrel, but Ghost managed it. He hugged his knees close to his chest, making himself as small as possible.

“Gods be with you,” Elaine whispered as she closed the lid.

Ghost’s world went dark again. Luckily, there was a small hole in the side of the barrel where the cork should be. If he shifted a little he could look out of it. The barrel shook as the cart lurched into motion, but his weight kept it steady. For a while, all he could hear was the sound of the horse’s hooves and the rattle of the wheels as they made their way through the valley. Inside the barrel, Ghost could feel every bump in the road and soon his

limbs began to ache from his cramped position. The rhythmic sound of the wagon began to lull him into a kind of trance. He was about to doze off, when he felt them begin to slow.

“Men ahead,” Angus warned. Ghost could hear the panic in his voice and hoped his nerves wouldn’t betray them.

“Morning, Angus!” a voice greeted them and the wagon slowed to a stop. “What brings you to the road so early?”

“Just doing a delivery for my mother.”

“Ah, the lovely Elaine! Her ale is always in high demand,” the man said, laughing as though he had made a joke.

Angus gave a nervous titter. “What are you gentlemen doing out here?” he asked.

“Keeping an eye out for those two runaways,” the man confided.

“I thought they were hiding in the woods?”

“Baine said there was no sign of them. But he thinks they’re still in the valley.”

“Well, good luck finding them.”

“Not so fast,” said another voice, much less pleasant than the first. Ghost thought he recognised it from somewhere. “We need to check those barrels.”

The other man laughed. “Fullbrook here is just looking for an excuse to sample your ale.”

With a shock Ghost realised who the voice belonged to. There was the crunch of gravel and the cart dipped as someone climbed onto the back. Ghost saw a shadow move through the hole and heard him lift the lid off the other barrel. There was a long pause during which Ghost held his breath, although he knew it was no use. Any moment now, they would be discovered. Their journey over before it even started...

“Well?” the other man asked.

“There’s nothing to see here,” Fineas said in an expressionless voice. A moment later Ghost felt him clamber off the cart.

“I guess we’ll be off,” Angus said briskly and the wagon began to roll forward again.

“Send my love to your mother!” the man called behind them.

Ghost let out a long breath, feeling relieved but confused at the same time. Why had Fineas let them go? Perhaps he thought his daughter was better off leaving town than falling into the hands of Baine and his cronies. Or maybe he was worried that Nella would become his problem again, now that Maeve was behind bars... Perhaps he didn’t care either way. Whatever his reasons, Ghost could not help but feel grateful to him at that moment.

#

They stopped midmorning to rest and stretch their legs. Ghost’s whole body ached from being cooped up in the barrel for hours. By then, most of the mist was gone but a few stubborn clouds still clung to the mountains behind them. Angus excused himself to make his ablutions and Ghost saw his chance.

“What happened with—” But Nella cut him off, before he could ask about her father.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked, folding her arms. She looked determined to avoid the subject and Ghost thought it best to move on.

“I was thinking... Topsfield is on the way to Lynden.”

“So?”

“Maeve said the bone witch lives in the woods near Lynden.”

The sullen expression vanished from Nella’s face, replaced by contemplation. “I see... But how will we convince Angus to take us? He’s under strict orders from his mother.”

“Then we won’t ask.”

When the youth returned, they were allowed to sit on the back of the wagon, on the condition that they kept their hoods up and be ready to hide at a moment’s notice. But the precautions were unnecessary as they met no-one on the road. The neighbouring farm folk mostly visited the village on market day, but Ghost wondered if they had heard of recent events and decided to stay away for the time being...

They followed the river as it wound from the valley through the surrounding hills and countryside in an endless green trail. Ghost knew it would eventually be joined by the Northern Fork to become the swift-flowing Boundless River, which ran all the way to the sea. The road was still muddy from the previous day’s rain, and their progress was slow. At midday, they stopped again to have a meal of bread and cheese and to let the horse rest.

“We’ll stop at the Burnt Mill tonight,” Angus said. “If all goes well, we should be in Topsfield by late tomorrow afternoon.”

“We have to do it tonight,” Ghost whispered to Nella when they were back on the wagon. “There will be too many eyes on us in Topsfield. It will make it harder to get away...”

He felt guilty about deceiving Angus, after the youth had risked so much to help them. But they had no choice, he told himself. Someone needed to stop Wynna, and with Maeve locked up, they were the only ones who could.

#

As the day progressed, a green line appeared on the horizon, marking the beginning of the Wildwood. It slowly advanced towards them until they could make out the shapes of individual trees among the dark mass. Ghost had grown up hearing tales of the forest but had

never seen it for himself. Stretching from the Boundless River to the Black Mountains in the north, it lay beyond the Queen's justice and was said to be a refuge for outlaws and thieves.

"It's just a bunch of trees," Maeve used to say when asked about the forest. "Nothing to get excited about." But Ghost could not help but feel a growing sense of unease as it drew closer.

They reached the mill just as dusk began to fall. All that remained of the tall stone structure were its outer walls, blackened in place by the fire that had claimed it years ago. However, its bridge had remained intact and was the only crossing for miles either way. Inside the husk of the building they found the remainders of a cooking fire and other signs of recent visitors. The spot was clearly a popular campsite for travellers on the River Road, its walls offering some shelter from the rain and cold.

Nella volunteered to dress down the horse, while Angus and Ghost gathered wood and set up camp. Darkness fell around them as they worked, followed by a creeping cold that soon saw them gathered around the fire.

They dined on spicy meat pies, which Elaine had prepared for them. Afterwards, Nella made them all tea with a mixture of Maeve's herbs. Earlier that day, she and Ghost had studied the contents of the witch's satchel and had come up with a plan: they would lace Angus's tea with a mixture of poppy tears and valerian root, which would make him fall into a deep sleep. Then they would take Star and ride east, following the Forest Road to Lynden.

Ghost was not thrilled at the prospect of riding through the woods – especially at night – but it was the shortest route to their destination. The River Road would take them through the Hollow Hills, adding an extra day to their journey. Ghost had deduced all of this from a map he had found in Maeve's satchel. It was packed with travel supplies and he

suspected the witch had known this day would come.

Ghost was studying the map again after dinner, when he noticed something odd.

“Milltown?” he wondered aloud. “But that can’t be...”

“What’s this?” Nella asked, getting up to look at the map.

“It says there is supposed to be a village here. But I’ve never heard of it.”

Across the fire, Angus shifted uncomfortably. “That’s because it no longer exists.”

“Did it burn down like the Mill?” Nella asked.

“In a way...” the youth said evasively.

“Was it during the Prince’s War?” Ghost asked. People were always reluctant to talk about the conflict with the Were Clans around him.

“No. It happened nearly ten years after the war. A rogue band of Were warriors razed the village to the ground... There was only one survivor.”

Nella gasped in horror. “Who would do such a thing?”

“It was said they meant to start another war...”

“What happened to them?” Ghost asked.

“They were dealt with swiftly, by both sides. Most of them were captured by the Queen’s Guard and executed.”

“Most?”

Angus hesitated. “One escaped - the leader of the group. They call him Ravencloak.”

“Ravencloak...” Ghost repeated the name. It tasted foul in his mouth like offal.

“Where is he now?”

The youth shrugged, looking eager to change the subject. “They say he is a powerful skin witch. He has evaded capture for years...”

Nella looked around them, as though the man would suddenly appear through one of the hollow windows. Ghost could not help but share her alarm. With monsters like that roaming the wilderness, no wonder Maeve had cautioned them not to open the door after dark. And now here they were, alone in an abandoned building at the edge of the woods...

Ghost did not think he would've been able to sleep that night even if he had wanted to. Luckily, Angus was not similarly afflicted. The sleeping draught seemed to be doing its work because soon after he announced it was time for bed. Ghost listened as Angus's breathing slowed until he was sure the youth was fast asleep, then he took the velvet pouch from where he hid it in his bedroll. Inside was a small glass vial, attached to a leather cord. Its contents shone brightly in the darkness like liquid moonlight. The binding inside was one of Maeve's inventions, but she rarely used it as it could cause horrible burns.

Ghost carefully skirted the sleeping figure of Angus. "Sorry," he whispered as he passed him.

Together he and Nella stole through a gap in the wall, where Star was tied to a tree. Nella approached the horse with its saddle, as Ghost kept an eye on Angus. When Nella was done, Ghost gave her a leg up and clambered onto Star behind her. They steered the horse around the mill to the bridge, the vial lighting their way like a lantern.

They paused at the edge of the water, staring at the dark trees before them. Ghost felt Nella tense in the saddle in front of him.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

In answer, she hit the reins and Star trotted forward. Ghost heard the rush of the dark water beneath them and then they were among the trees and there was no turning back.

CHAPTER 8–THE WILDWOOD

They rode for hours into the dark heart of the forest. The deeper they travelled, the bigger the trees became, their roots stretching forth like a giant spider's webs. They made their way by the light of the vial, which shone like a pale star on Ghost's breast.

The forest was still around them, watching them pass without comment. Only when Nella fell asleep in the saddle before him, did Ghost decide it was safe to stop for the night. They made camp at the base of a hollow tree, which he had spotted from the path. Nella immediately curled up between the roots, while Ghost made a fire to keep any nearby predators at bay. He had heard that there were wolves in the forest but so far there had been no sign of them. He settled down with his back to the tree, determined to keep watch.

The exhaustion of the day's journey must've caught up with him, because the next thing he knew it was morning and Nella was shaking him awake. They ate the remainder of the bread and cheese for breakfast, their last proper meal until they reached Lynden. They

had taken Angus's coin purse with them when they ran, but left enough money so he could buy some food on his way home.

The forest hardly looked more inviting by day. As they rode deeper, what little light there was disappeared, replaced by a perpetual green gloom. In this twilight kingdom it was difficult to tell the time of day. The trees all looked the same and, even though he knew the track ran north, Ghost felt like they were going in circles.

"Tell me a story," he asked Nella, desperate for a distraction.

"A story?" she asked in surprise. "What story?"

"Anything. You choose..."

"All right," the girl said, sounding thoughtful. "Astrild and the Prince."

Ghost groaned. He should've known she would pick the tale of the Were warrior-maiden. On the rare occasions that a bard came to the village, she would always make them tell it.

"You said I could choose," Nella said indignantly.

"Very well..."

"Once there lived a woman called Astrild of the Mountain Clan. She was known by her people for her beauty but also her bravery. Once a skilled warrior-maiden, she gave up her bow to become a healer. One day she ran out of spices for her craft, so her brother Raynar offered to go with her to get supplies.

Raynar was a great warrior and nephew to the Chief of the Mountain Clan. As his uncle's heir, he carried a precious sword gifted to the family by a Mari merchant prince.

Astrild accepted her brother's offer and together they journeyed south.

Unbeknownst to them, Prince Lucan had recently arrived in Highgard. It was said that

his mother the Queen had sent him north to stay out of trouble. But the Prince soon grew bored at the border town where there were no grand balls or high society. So one day he decided to ride out with one of the patrols.

It was there that he encountered Raynar and Astrild on the road. History disagrees about what happened next. Some say he saw Raynar's grand sword and wanted to take it as a prize. Others, that he saw Raynar's sister and wanted her. Either way, the Prince commanded his men to slay Raynar and capture Astrild. Word soon spread of what the Prince had done and reached their uncle in the Black Mountains. When the Prince learned who he had slain, he took Astrild and fled to Cedric's Eye.

The Were Chief gathered an army and marched south to lay siege to the mountain stronghold. But the cowardly Prince held Astrild hostage, threatening to kill her if her uncle attacked. Astrild was frightened because she knew that with every passing day the Queen's armies drew closer. And if they arrived before her uncle's men took the keep they would all perish. So she did the only thing she could to save her people – she took her own life.

When her uncle's men heard of Astrild's death they were so incensed that they stormed the keep that same night. When the Queen arrived the next day, the castle had been captured and the Prince taken hostage. However, the Queen had not led her host north for slaughter, but for justice to be served. And the life of a Prince in exchange for the heir of a Were chief seemed fair. So the Queen sacrificed her son so that peace would be restored between the nations, as it had stood for a hundred years before her.

As for Astrild, her ashes were taken back to the Black Mountains and scattered on the wind. It is said whenever the warm South Easter wind blows, it is Astrild reminding her people of her sacrifice..."

Nella finished the story and everything was quiet again, as though the forest itself had been listening.

Ghost shook his head. "Why do you love that story so much?"

"Astrild was so brave. Sacrificing herself like that..."

"Raynar was also brave," Ghost said dryly. "Yet he was killed for a sword."

"No he wasn't! He died trying to save his sister from Prince Lucan's clutches!"

"It doesn't matter why. His bravery still got him killed in the end. Look at Maeve..."

Nella let out a gasp. "Sorry! I didn't mean – Maeve's not going to..."

But the girl ignored his apologies, turning her back on him. So they rode on in silence, deeper and deeper into the gloom.

#

Late that afternoon they came to a fork in the road. It was marked by a standing stone, carved with symbols in a language Ghost did not recognise.

"Which way?" Nella asked. It was the first time she had spoken in hours.

Ghost studied the stone and saw that its back was covered in a layer of moss as thick as fur. "To the right," he said, choosing the eastern branch of the road.

Nella kicked the stirrups and Star trotted forward obediently. "What was that stone?" she asked as they rode away.

"I think it was a milestone," Ghost said, eager for the chance to talk again. "The Were traders must also use this road to travel to Highgard. I bet the other branch goes all the way north to the Black Mountains..."

They rode for a couple more hours until the light began to fade. "We should stop before dark," Ghost said and Nella slowed the horse.

They took shelter in a hollow beneath a small stone ridge. This time Nella made the fire while Ghost took care of Star. They ate the rest of the apples for dinner with much less enthusiasm than the horse. They were still hungry after, so Nella made tea with water from the small stream that sprung from the ridge. It helped fill them a little more but Ghost thought that they had better reach Lynden fast.

“How much further?” Nella asked, as though reading his mind.

Ghost took out the map from where it was rolled up in his cloak. “About a day’s ride,” he said, studying its contents. “If we make an early start tomorrow, we should be there by nightfall.”

“Thank the Four,” Nella said. “I don’t think I can stand being in this place for much longer.” She gave a small shiver and hugged herself.

“It’s not *that* bad,” Ghost said, trying to convince himself. Just then a piercing cry tore through the forest.

Wolves.

“You were saying?” Nella said, her voice gone suddenly shrill.

Behind them Star gave a nervous whinny. “It’s all right, girl,” Ghost said. “They won’t come up to the fire.”

There was another howl, closer this time.

“Get behind me,” Ghost said, pushing Nella back against the ridge.

He grabbed a large branch and lit the end in the fire like a torch. They listened with bated breath but no further cries came. Ghost was about to lower his branch when he heard something move in the undergrowth. Two figures stepped out of the trees before them. The light of the fire revealed that they were men, not wolves. One was tall and burly with a

shaven head, the other smaller with long, matted hair. Each wore a wolf-skin cloak, the head of the dead animal resting on top of their own like a hideous mask.

Ghost stepped in front of Nella, raising his branch like a sword. The two men grinned at the action, and there was something wolfish about their smiles. The smaller of the two stepped forward, addressing Ghost in a strange language.

“I’m not Were,” Ghost said warily. “I don’t speak your tongue.”

The man paused, cocking his head. “Then what are you?” he asked in a heavy accent.

“I am Ghost and this is Nella. We’re travellers on our way to Lynden.”

“Travellers!” The man looked at his companion and they both laughed. “You’re far too young to be travelling by yourself. More like runaways...” They began to move towards them, one on each side of the fire.

“What’s this?” the big one said, bending down to pick up Maeve’s satchel. He took a look inside, then tossed it to his companion. “Nothing but a bunch of herbs,” he said in disgust.

But the long-haired man smiled. “Well, well,” he said, inspecting the contents of the bag. “Looks like we’ve caught ourselves a pair of witches. The Master will be pleased...” He turned to his companion and they conferred in their own language.

Nella looked at Ghost and he could read the unspoken questions in her eyes: who were these men and what did they want with them? But he only shook his head, as confused as she was.

“Change of plan, witchlings,” the long-haired man announced after a moment.

“You’re coming with us.”

The men began to move towards them like wolves closing in on their prey. Ghost took

a step backwards, looking around desperately for a way to escape. But they were trapped against the stone ridge.

“Stay back,” he warned their would-be attackers, brandishing his piece of wood.

The long-haired man smiled and a long knife appeared in his hand, the blade gleaming in the light of the fire. Out of the corner of his eye, Ghost saw the big man approach Nella. She lashed out in desperation, but he grabbed her and a tussle ensued.

“Nella!” Ghost cried. Instinctively, he lunged forward and jabbed the man in the ribs with his stick. He let out a grunt of surprise and let go of the struggling girl. Ghost experienced a brief moment of triumph, then he felt a sharp pain at the back of his head and his legs gave way beneath him.

CHAPTER 9—RAVENS AND WOLVES

The men bound Nella and Ghost's hands and lashed them to Star's saddle. The horse was wary of the strangers, as though it sensed there was something unnatural about them. A hard lump had formed at the back of Ghost's head where he'd been struck. It throbbed painfully whenever he moved like a miniature heart.

Their captors led them from the hollow and back to the forest path. Ghost tried to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. But his rhythm was broken as Nella stumbled ahead of him. The rope between them jerked, sending a shooting pain through his skull.

The long-haired Northman turned, grinning above his torch. "Careful there, witchling. Don't want to fall and break that pretty neck of yours."

Nella fixed him with an angry stare. "Where are we going?" she demanded. "What do you want with us?"

But the man only laughed. “So many questions!” He made to turn back around, but Nella stopped him.

“Wait!” she cried. “You can’t just do this. You can’t just *take* us! It’s a violation of the treaty...”

“The treaty?” the man asked, sounding confused.

“According to the peace treaty between our nations, no member of a Were Clan may intentionally cause harm to any of the Queen’s subjects or their property,” she recited. They had learnt about the accords in their history lessons with Maeve.

There was a pause as the long-haired man turned to his partner in astonishment. Then they both burst out laughing. “We are the Unbound, girl,” he said. “We don’t recognise the authority of any clan.”

“Or that southern hag you call a queen,” his companion added.

They continued laughing and Nella blushed furiously. It had been a valiant attempt, but no use. Clearly these were lawless men, who submitted to no-one’s rule. Yet they had mentioned a master, before... Ghost was left pondering this mystery, as they marched deeper into the night.

#

The forest was dark with only a ghost of a moon in the sky and every bump in the road sent them stumbling. As the evening wore on, their falls became more frequent as exhaustion began to take its toll. Eventually, they were forced to stop to rest for a few hours. The two Northman, however, did not seem tired at all. Ghost began to suspect that they were no ordinary men...

When Ghost awoke sometime after dawn, his head still ached but the worst of the

throbbing had subsided. A few hours' sleep had also done Nella good and the colour was back in her cheeks. After that they took turns on Star, as the men would only let them ride one at a time. But they conceded to unbind their hands, confident that they could not escape.

Ghost had little to do for most of the day but listen to the men talk. He couldn't understand most of what was said, but picked up certain words or phrases they kept repeating. He learnt that the long-haired man was called Yarrick and his burly companion was Urs. One phrase they also kept using was *Hrafmantel*. Ghost wondered if it was the name of their destination. So far he had been unable to figure out where they were going, although he thought they were still heading east. They had left the Forest Road after first light, making their own way through the trees. It was slow going and the men grew increasingly frustrated at the pace.

It began to rain in the afternoon, a light drizzle that deepened into a steady downpour. The rain did not improve the Northmen's mood, forcing them to stop early for the day. They made camp on the edge of a clearing, under a large yew that absorbed most of the rain. The wood was damp so it took a while to get a fire started, but once it was lit the men began to cheer up. They even shared some of their dinner with Nella and Ghost, a dried salted meat they called *flesket*. The meat was tough and they had to suck on it until it was soft enough to chew.

After a while, Urs produced a flask that they passed to each other between bouts of laughter. Yarrick even began to sing a raucous song of which Ghost thought he recognised the tune. The Northman saw him watching and winked.

"You like my singing?" he asked Ghost, who didn't respond. Up to this point, the men had mostly ignored him and Nella and he preferred to keep it that way. The man laughed at

Ghost's dour expression.

"What about you, girl?" he asked Nella. "You like to dance?" Nella didn't respond, looking wary. But the man only seemed encouraged by her reluctance. "Urs, give her a twirl!" he called to his companion.

The big man laughed and picked her up from behind in a giant bear hug. Nella kicked and screamed as he spun her around, and Yarrick howled with laughter.

Ghost was on his feet before he realised what he was doing. "Put her down!" he shouted at the man.

Yarrick stopped laughing and his eyes narrowed at Ghost. "Or what?" he asked, staggering up to him. "You going to make him?"

Up close he reeked of alcohol and stale sweat. Ghost had a sudden vision of Tristan Blackthorn standing over him and his hands shook with rage. Quickly, he stuffed them in his pockets and felt his right hand brush against something soft. As the silence stretched between them, Yarrick seemed to grow bored.

"I knew it," he said, beginning to turn away. "The boy doesn't have it in him."

Ghost felt something snap inside of him. Without thinking, he reached into the velvet pouch and took the vial from his pocket. Yarrick turned at motion and the vial hit him full in the face, shattering on impact. The man let out a mad howl and clawed at his head. Then he collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain.

Ghost staggered back, clutching his hand to chest. Pain was spreading down it like wildfire, overwhelming his senses. On the other side of the fire, he saw Urs drop Nella and draw his knife. He tried to get to back to his feet, but it took all his willpower just to stay conscious.

Through a tunnel of pain he saw the man coming towards him. Then there was a great roar and a shadow tore from the trees, hurtling towards the Northman. It hit him with the force of a boulder, knocking him to the ground. Then Ghost's vision narrowed and he felt the world go dark.

#

When Ghost came to he was lying flat on his back, staring up at the dark forest canopy. Stars danced between the leaves like an endless swarm of fireflies. He had a brief moment to wonder how he got there and then the pain started. He must've cried out because there was a startled "Ghost!" and then Nella was bending over him.

"Drink this," she said, holding something to his mouth. Ghost gulped down the liquid, desperate for relief from the pain. He felt a gentle cold spread through his body, extinguishing the fire in his arm. Dimly, he was aware of Nella speaking to someone outside his line of vision. Then he let the wave crash over him, carrying him off to blissful sleep.

When Ghost awoke again it was light outside and he instantly recoiled at the brightness. Under the blankets, his arm was stiff with bandages that emitted a strong herbal scent. But he could feel no pain there, only a sort of throbbing tightness. Nella must've applied a numbing poultice and he thanked the gods she had remembered Maeve's satchel. After checking on his arm, Ghost turned his attention to his surroundings. They were still at the campsite in the clearing, but it seemed to be late in the morning. He looked for Nella and saw her hunched over an iron pot by the fire. She seemed to sense his stare, because she looked up and saw he was awake.

"Ghost!" she cried and rushed over to him. "How are you feeling? Your arm—"

"It's fine," Ghost waved aside her ministrations. "How long have I been out?"

“Oh, about twelve hours I would say.”

Ghost nodded, trying to work out the time. He was about to ask another question when a man came striding into the clearing. At first he thought the tall figure was Urs and scrambled to get to his feet. But then he saw that the man wore a dark brown pelt and not a wolf-skin cloak. Too late he remembered that Nella had not been alone the last time he saw her...

“Who’s this?” he asked the girl, who had leaned in to support him.

“Calm down, Ghost. He’s a friend.”

“A friend?” On closer inspection, the man didn’t look anything like the big Northman. He had a similar build and was dressed in the same kind of hunting leathers, but his mane of golden hair immediately set him apart. His beard was also neat and trim, where the other’s had been long and unkempt. “Where are the two wolves?” Ghost asked suddenly.

“Dead,” the man replied. “Or at least Urs is. Yarrick managed to crawl away before I could get him. I found his trail, heading north. It should be the last we’ll see of him for a while... We have you to thank for that,” he said with a nod to Ghost.

But Ghost did not return his acknowledgement. “I’m sorry, but who are you?” he asked, still on his guard.

“My name is Torben,” he said simply, presenting no clan name.

“You’re also... Unbound?” Ghost asked, remembering the term Yarrick had used.

“I am,” Torben said with a grimace, as though it pained him to admit. “Though I’m not aligned with those brutes who abducted you. I’ve been tracking them since Topsfield, hoping they would lead me to their master.”

“Torben is a bounty hunter,” Nella explained.

Ghost frowned at the mention of the wolves' mysterious leader. "Who is this master everyone keeps talking about? And what does he want with us?"

"Ravencloak chooses his servants for their abilities," Torben said. "Take Yarrick and Urs – they're both skin witches. And you?" His blue eyes surveyed Ghost. "A Wereborn child raised by a southern witch? He would definitely have found a use for you..."

Ghost blinked in surprise. So the two Northmen had been servants of Ravencloak, the murderous skin witch who had burned Milltown to the ground. Who knew what he would've done to Nella and him, had they fallen into his hands. Or worse, made them do...

"Torben has agreed to accompany us to the bone witch's clearing," Nella interrupted his thoughts.

"Thank you," Ghost said at last and the man nodded.

"Children should not be wandering these woods alone. Besides," Torben paused and a rueful smile played on his lips. "I know the place well."

CHAPTER 10–THE BONE WITCH

After a breakfast of leftover provisions, they set off from the clearing. Torben had spent most of the morning collecting wood for a pyre for Urs. The Northman's body had been laid out on the other side of the clearing, wrapped in its wolf-skin cloak like a shroud.

"The witch would not be happy if I left a body in her woods," Torben explained. He lit the pyre before they headed out, not staying to watch it burn.

To Ghost's relief, Nella insisted that he ride Star. His arm didn't hurt any more thanks to the pain tonic, but he still felt shaky. Torben led them to the Forest Road, where they headed south until they found the path to Lynden. Star seemed happy to be back on even ground and was less skittish around Torben than his Were brethren.

Ghost studied the man as they made their way down the track. Nella also seemed to trust him, but he still had some reservations. Why was a Northman working as a bounty hunter in the borderlands? Did he choose to leave his clan or was he banished for some crime

like Ravencloak and his ilk?

Torben saw him watching and smiled. “You doing all right there, Ghost?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Ghost said quickly. “Actually, I have a question...” Torben waited for him to continue and Ghost felt his nerve failing. Desperately, he tried to think of something and then the man’s bear-skin cloak caught his eye. “Are you a skin witch?” he blurted out.

Torben gave a dry chuckle. “What gave it away?”

Nella, who had been staring into the distance, was suddenly all ears. “How exactly does being a skin witch work?” she asked.

Torben looked thoughtful for a moment. “A skin witch’s pelt is treated with a binding that preserves the essence of the animal within. This allows us to draw on the essence when the need arises,” he explained.

“So you have different powers, depending on what skin you wear?”

“Yes, and no. There needs to be a certain compatibility with the animal’s essence or else the binding won’t work. It’s why most of us only ever choose one form.”

“Can anyone learn to be a skin witch?” Nella asked eagerly.

“Any warrior with the ability may participate in the trial,” Torben said cautiously.

“But not all choose to.”

“Why not?” Nella sounded confused, as though she couldn’t imagine how anyone could possibly refuse.

“Changing skins can be dangerous to the uninitiated... A witch can lose themselves in the essence of the beast and forget who they are.”

Nella fell quiet and Ghost leaped at the chance. “Are there many of you?” he asked, curious of the advantage the Were would have in battle.

“A few,” Torben said vaguely. “Witches are much more common among my people.”

“And bone witches?”

“They are... rarer.”

“Why? What powers do they have?”

Torben hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “Where a wood witch tends to the living, a bone witch looks after the dead.”

Ghost and Nella exchanged a wary look. With everything that had happened since they entered the forest, they had almost forgotten what awaited them in Riverborne. But the prospect of meeting the bone witch made it all feel real again. Ghost wondered what was happening back home, if there had been any more attacks. If something happened to Maeve, or even the Millers... They had to make it back in time before anyone else got hurt. The thought gave Ghost a renewed sense of purpose and he ignored the growing pain in his arm.

#

As the afternoon wore on, the pain increased until Ghost could no longer ignore it. Nella gave him a few drops of the tonic again, which brought some relief but made him drowsy in return. But Torben showed no sign of slowing, even as the shadows deepened around them. Ghost wondered if they were destined to spend another night stumbling in the dark. That’s what I get for breaking Maeve’s light, he thought wryly. He would’ve laughed but the pain in his arm made him wince instead.

The first stars were out by the time Torben finally signalled for them to stop. “Down there,” he said and pointed to a lesser trail that snaked off from their path.

Ghost swallowed. Who knew what waited for them at its end? Torben had been reluctant to speak about the witch and had deflected most of their questions about her.

Whether out of superstition or fear, Ghost could not tell. He supposed there was only one way to find out...

He began to dismount Star and Nella came forward to assist him.

"You ready?" he asked and she nodded, looking scared but determined. Together they followed Torben into the trees, Ghost and Star bringing up the rear.

The trail was narrow but well-trodden, kept clear by a continuous stream of pilgrims from Lynden and further abroad. Torben said the villagers came to the witch for healing, as well as to perform funeral rites for their dead.

The trees began to dwindle until Ghost could see something glitter in the distance. It turned out to be the water of a small lake that took up most of the clearing. A light burned on the opposite shore where a cabin floated on a small island.

"Leave Star," Torben said and Ghost obeyed, tying her reigns to a nearby tree.

They skirted the lake and its barricade of reeds until they reached a rickety wooden bridge. They were about to approach, when a door opened at the other end.

"Stop," a voice commanded.

Light spilled out from the doorway, where a woman had appeared. Black hair fell in waves around a smooth, brown face that was so lovely it took Ghost several moments to notice the crossbow below it.

Torben stepped into the light. "Tamira," he greeted the witch.

Her eyes narrowed in recognition. "Torben," she said without lowering her weapon.

"The bow is new."

"It keeps away unwanted visitors. Speaking of which, what are you doing here?"

"It is not for my sake that I have come," Torben said and put a hand on Ghost's

shoulder, pulling him forward.

The woman seemed to notice him and Nella for the first time. “Who is this?” she asked.

“My name is Ghost, mistress, and this is Nella. We’ve come a long way to ask for your help.”

The witch looked him over and then lowered her bow. “Very well,” she said. “You may come in.”

#

Torben didn’t wait to be invited twice, crossing the bridge in a few easy strides. It was a conical structure, built on stilts that echoed the cabin’s design. Ghost followed behind, less certain. Nella caught up with him, her eyes wide with surprise. “She’s Mari,” she whispered.

The Mari were a nation of merchants and sailors, who usually favoured big port cities like Seafort to the west. All of the stories spoke of the islanders’ great love of the ocean, and it was rare to find one so far inland. They were also said to be a vibrant people, with a penchant for embroidery and rich silks. Yet the witch’s simple grey dress was unadorned, save for the chain of nails that hung from her neck like iron teeth.

Inside, the cabin was just as plain: a table and chairs stood before a stone hearth where a fire crackled. Bunches of dried herbs festooned the wooden walls, which were bare of any other decoration. In the other corner stood a cot, covered with a patchwork quilt. The scene was warm and familiar, and immediately put Ghost at ease.

The witch offered them a seat by the fire, while she put a kettle on to boil. Torben sat down on the bench, looking large out of place in the small cabin.

“Sorry about the bow,” Tamira said curtly. “There’ve been accounts of strangers

abroad.”

“We know,” Torben answered. “That’s how the boy got injured.”

The witch looked at Ghost’s arm. “What happened?” she asked, so he began the tale of being captured by the wolves and breaking Maeve’s vial.

“A clever, but dangerous thing,” she remarked of the binding. She listened patiently as he told of Torben’s rescue.

“You were tracking them?” she asked the skin witch without meeting his eyes.

“They a killed farmer and his wife in Topsfield.”

She nodded gravely. “And the body?”

“Burnt it this morning.”

She looked at him then, her dark eyes unreadable. “Good,” was all she said. She turned to Nella and Ghost, and her expression softened. “Now, you must be hungry after your journey. I’ll heat us something and then you can tell me why you came all this way.”

That something turned out to be a hearty rabbit and mushroom stew. Nella gulped down the warm broth, but Ghost ate more slowly, distracted by the pain in his arm. Tamira seem to notice his discomfort.

“Let me take a look at that arm,” she said. Gently, she unwound the bandages, praising Nella for her skill. The girl blushed into her bowl of stew but looked pleased. A pungent green pulp was packed onto the final layer of linen.

The witch sniffed the mixture. “Knitweed and comfrey?” she asked and Nella nodded.

Ghost steeled himself as she removed the material. The skin beneath was pink and inflamed, peeling back in place to reveal the flesh below. The worst was on his palm, which had not been protected by layers of clothing.

Tamira inspected the burns. “You’re lucky,” she said after a while. “The damage does not seem to run deep. It should heal in a couple of weeks.”

Ghost sighed with relief, then smiled at Nella. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t thank her yet,” the witch said. “We still need to clean the wound and change the dressing. You’ll assist?” she asked Nella, who nodded eagerly.

They set to work, boiling water and cleaning the wound with vinegar. Ghost distracted himself by telling their story, starting with the fire and how they found Wynna, then Tristan’s death and Nella’s subsequent vision. Tamira was quiet throughout, speaking only to give Nella instructions. When he got to Maeve’s capture, he stopped, unable to continue...

“Your aunt was right to send for me,” Tamira said gently. “It’s clear, the cause of your misfortunes is a spirit – and an angry one at that. Your fire must’ve summoned her, without vervain to counteract the wormwood...”

“Will you help us?” Ghost asked hopefully.

The witch hesitated. “I will do what I can,” she promised. “But now, I think it is time for bed. You can take my cot – I will sleep next door in the sickbay.”

There was a sudden gust of cold air, as Torben re-entered the cabin. He’d excused himself earlier on the pretext of taking care of Star, but Ghost thought he really wanted to get some distance from the witch. He was not so lucky this time.

“Torben, a word,” she said coolly and he followed her back outside.

#

“I wonder what the story is with those two,” Nella remarked as they got ready for bed.

Ghost shrugged. “The warmer love burns...”

“The colder when it turns,” Nella completed the saying. “So you think they were were in love once?”

But Ghost didn’t answer her. A thought had just occurred to him. “What if,” he began, “that’s what happened to Wynna? She loved Tristan, but he betrayed her somehow...”

“So she killed him out of spite?” Nella asked. “I suppose that could be true... But what about Livia?”

“Jealousy,” Ghost said quickly. “Maybe she thought that he would marry her...”

“But he married Livia instead?”

“For her dowry. Her father was a rich blacksmith from Topsfield.” It all fits, he thought excitedly.

Nella bit her lip, looking pensive. “Maybe she’s done now,” she said at last. “And the attacks will stop.”

“Maybe...” Ghost said without any real conviction. “But we can’t rely on it.”

CHAPTER 11—EYE OF THE BEAST

Nella woke Ghost the next morning and insisted that he join her for a bath in the lake. “If you don’t then you can sleep on the floor with Torben,” she threatened, so he had no choice but to obey. It was sunny outside but the water was icy cold and instantly washed away any remnants of sleep. As he waited for Nella to finish, Ghost studied their surroundings. It turned out the cabin wasn’t the only structure in the clearing: two huts stood on neighbouring islands, linked by identical bridges. One must be the sickbay that Tamira had mentioned the night before.

The witch was waiting for them back in the cabin with a pot of hot porridge. Torben was already seated at the table and nodded as they sat down.

“Morning,” Tamira greeted them. “How are you feeling?”

“All right,” Ghost said, holding up his arm up for inspection. Despite his best efforts, the bandages had gotten soaked in the lake.

“Those need changing,” the witch concluded. She let him eat first, though, as the cold water had left him ravenous.

“Who taught you all this?” Ghost asked as she applied a fresh dressing to his wounds.

“You mean where did a Mari sea rat like me learn the finer points of witchery?”

Ghost blushed. “I’m sorry. I-I didn’t mean...”

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling to show that she wasn’t offended. “My great-grandmother was Were. When it became clear that I’d inherited her gifts, my father set out to find me a teacher. He was a fur trader and had many dealings with the Were Clans at Highgard...”

“I didn’t know the Were Clans took outsiders in?”

She shook her head. “They don’t as a rule. My teacher had a hard time convincing them to let me stay. But they came around in the end.” Torben gave a snort. “Most of them, anyway...”

“Your teacher must’ve been a brave man.”

“Stubborn, more like it,” Torben muttered.

“Would you like to meet him?” Tamira asked. “He’s staying with me at the moment in the sickbay.”

“Yes please!” Nella said, but Ghost was hesitant. As a rule, he didn’t like meeting strangers. They always asked questions that he didn’t know the answers to, like “What’s your name?” or “Where are you from?” Of course, he could not admit any of this aloud...

“Very well,” he said.

#

The sickbay turned out to be the largest of the other huts. Inside, there was room for only two

cots, one of which was taken up by an old man. He had the shrunken appearance of a convalescent, but his blue eyes were still sharp above his white beard.

“Torben,” he greeted the warrior. “It’s been a long time.”

“Master Aelfred.”

“How are you, my friend?”

“Better than you,” Torben said and gestured at the bed.

The old man chuckled, a sound like crumbling rock. “I hear you’re still waging your war?” he asked once his mirth had subsided.

“We all have our battles to fight.”

It was Tamira’s turn to snort. The sound seemed to catch the master’s attention.

“But we’re being rude!” he said. “Who are your guests?”

“These are the children we spoke about, Master Aelfred. Finella and Ghost of Riverborne.”

“I see... Come closer, so I can have a proper look at you.”

Nella gave Ghost a small push and he stumbled forward.

“Ye-es,” the old man murmured as he studied them. “I can hear the Blood sing in their veins. But which one to choose...”

“The Blood?” Nella said at the same time as Ghost asked “Choose?”

“I’ll explain outside,” Tamira said quickly. “Come. We must leave Torben and the master to talk...”

#

They followed the witch outside, where she paused at the edge of the water. A cool breeze reached up and tugged at the fringe of her shawl.

“What was that about?” Ghost asked.

“I wanted you to see for yourself. To understand,” Tamira began. “Master Aelfred is not well. And after everything he’s done for me... I cannot simply abandon him.”

Ghost frowned as he grasped what she was saying. “So you’re not coming with us, then?”

She shook her head, her eyes brimming with regret.

“But you’ll tell us how to do it? How to defeat her?”

“Would that it were that simple. The secrets of a bone witch can only be passed between master and student...”

“But you promised!” Nella burst out. “You said you’d help-”

Tamira held up a hand. “If I may. I believe I have found a way to do it. It won’t be easy. It will require great sacrifice on your part...”

“What is it?” Ghost asked, though he thought he already knew.

“One of you must become my apprentice. It is the only way.”

Her statement was met by silence, as they considered the implications. As usual, Nella was the first to react.

“Become your apprentice?” she asked in awe. “Come live here, in the forest? Learn to be a – bone witch?”

Tamira gave a solemn nod. “You don’t have to answer right now. I will give you the day to think it over.” She looked at Ghost, who had not spoken yet.

“What if we don’t agree?” he asked.

“Then I’m afraid I cannot help you...”

She left them standing there, staring out over the lake. A shadow-forest looked up at

them, a murky reflection that stained the water like ink.

“What are we going to do?” Nella asked.

Ghost did not immediately respond. His mind was churning, several emotions rising to the surface at once. “I can’t tell you what to do, Nella. It’s a choice we each have to make for ourselves... Personally, I’m not keen to come to live here, in the middle of nowhere-”

“But we already live in the middle of nowhere!” Nella protested.

“Riverborne is different,” Ghost said. “Its home. We have family and – and friends there...” He stumbled over the word, tasting the lie of it. Besides Nella and Maeve, and maybe the Millers, did he really have any friends in the village?

“Exactly!” Nella said. “We owe it to the villagers-”

“Owe?” Ghost began slowly. “I’m not sure that I owe them anything. Not after the way they’ve treated me all of these years. And now I’m supposed to – what? Give up my freedom to save them? My entire future?”

“But it’s our fault! It’s our responsibility-”

“Is it truly?” Ghost asked. “We didn’t create Wynna – all we did was wake her. *They* made her. Tristan and Livia and the rest of them... Why should *we* pay for *their* actions?”

Nella looked shocked at his sudden outburst. “Where is this coming from?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Ghost said. “You’re one of them. You always have been!” And with those words he stormed off, leaving a stricken Nella behind.

#

Ghost made for the forest, with the vague intention of visiting Star. But anger drove him deeper into the trees, away from the cabin and its occupants. Nella didn’t understand. The villagers always treated her with compassion, not contempt. “She’s such a pretty child,” they

would say to each other. But where were they after her mother died? When she spent months in the neglectful care of her father? Now that he thought of it, Nella had almost as much reason to hate them as he did. He heard her voice then, asking “*Surely you don’t hate them?*”

But what was the alternative?

He began to slow as his anger petered out. Exhausted, he sat down on a boulder, breathing hard. He had never thought much about the future. But even in his wildest dreams he had never imagined leaving the valley. A part of him had always hoped that, one day, things would change, that the villagers would learn to accept him... He felt foolish admitting it now and part of him hated himself for wanting their approval.

A twig cracked somewhere and Ghost looked up. “Nella?” he asked, thinking the girl must’ve followed him into the woods. He looked around but there was no sign of her. Still, he could not shake feeling that he wasn’t alone...

There was rustle and Ghost spun around. A figure emerged from the bushes behind him. At first, he had trouble registering what it was. When he did see, he recoiled in horror.

“Yarrick?” he asked.

The man was changed almost beyond recognition. Half of his face was consumed by angry burns, and there was a mad light in his eyes that wasn’t there before.

“I’m s-sorry about your face,” Ghost stammered. “There is a woman back in the clearing who could help. A witch-”

Yarrick gave a wild snarl at the word that sent a tremor of fear running through Ghost. Instinctively, he took a step back, placing the boulder between them.

“How did you find me?” he asked, trying to stall for time.

But the man did not seem to hear him. Too late Ghost remembered what Torben had

told them about skin witches losing themselves. The Yarrick that stood before him was more beast than man. There would be no reasoning with him in this state... Slowly, he began to circle Ghost like a wolf sizing up his prey. Ghost willed his legs to move, but they didn't want to obey. He stood frozen with fear as the beast closed in-

There was a sudden cry and a flash of red. Then Yarrick was lying crumpled on the ground. Nella stood over him, holding a large rock in one hand.

It took Ghost a moment to realise what had happened. "Run!" he cried, but Nella didn't move. She stood frozen, staring at the spot where the man had fallen. Ghost grabbed her by the arm and began pulling her away. She stumbled the first few steps but then began to run on her own. A few minutes later, they burst through the line of trees into the clearing. She stumbled the first few steps but then began to run on her own. A few minutes later, they burst through the line of trees into the clearing.

Torben took one look at their faces and reached for his axe. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Yarrick," Ghost panted. "Back there – in the woods..."

The man's face instantly hardened into resolve. "Get inside," he said and headed off into the trees.

#

Tamira was in the kitchen, clearing up after breakfast. She looked up as they entered the cabin, just in time to see Ghost bolt the door.

"What's going on? Ghost?"

"One of Ravencloak's men surprised us in the forest," he explained quickly.

"I h-hit him," Nella said. "There was so much blood..." Her face was drained of

colour and she looked as though she might be sick.

“It’s all right,” Tamira said, stepping forward to put a steadying arm around her.

“Ghost, go find Torben-”

“He already knows,” Ghost stopped her. “He’s gone after him.”

Tamira nodded approvingly. “Come.” She steered Nella towards the cot, where she draped a blanket around her shoulders. “I’ll make you some sweet tea for the shock.”

Ghost went to sit down on the edge of the bed next to Nella. Together they waited as the witch put on the kettle.

“Here we go,” she said after a while and handed each of them a cup. Ghost took a sip of the warm liquid and felt a sudden pang of guilt. It tasted of camomile and reminded him of the last time he had seen Maeve.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Nella. “I didn’t mean... You and Maeve are my family.”

“I know,” she said simply, as though it was a truth that did not need acknowledgement.

On impulse, Ghost reached for her hand on the bed next to him. It was as cold as the lake and he almost flinched, but she gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. He didn’t know how long they sat that way, but her hand was warm by the time Torben returned. Tamira, who had been waiting by the window, ran to the door. Ghost followed her outside, leaving Nella hovering in the doorway.

Torben was pulling an improvised stretcher, made from branches and Yarrick’s wolf-skin cloak. The man lay behind him, his head heavily bandaged with strips of material. He looked so subdued that for a moment Ghost thought that he might be dead, until he saw his chest rising.

Tamira ran forward to help and Ghost followed at a distance. “How bad is it?” she asked as they reached him.

“He’ll live,” Torben grunted. “Where do you want him?”

The witch paused to think for the moment. “The tanning shed,” she said. “I’d rather not disturb the master.”

Together they carried the stretcher to the furthest and smallest of the three cabins. The tanning shed was empty inside, save for rack of salted fish that was drying in one corner. The smell was terrible and Ghost understood why it had been assigned its own island.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked as they lay the stretcher down.

“I’ll need hot water,” Tamira said, so he hastened back to the cabin.

“How is he?” Nella asked as soon as he entered.

“He should make it,” Ghost said and she sank onto the bed in relief.

He went over to the hearth and emptied the contents of the kettle into a bucket, before putting more water on to boil. “I don’t think I thanked you earlier,” he began. “For saving my life.”

Nella shrugged. “You would’ve done the same for me.”

“I have,” he said and raised his bandaged arm. “Or have you forgotten my heroic gesture already?”

She gave a weak smile. “Well, I guess we’re even then.”

CHAPTER 12–THE CHOOSING

Ghost lugged the bucket of hot water back to the tanning shed. Tamira was bent over her patient inside, packing his wound with herbs to stall the bleeding.

“Is there anything else I can do?” he asked but she shook her head.

“Thank you, Ghost. But I can take it from here.”

He went to stand by Torben, who was keeping watch by the door. Ghost followed his gaze to where Yarrick lay on the stretcher. His eyelids twitched, but the rest of him was deathly still. Ghost remembered the mad light that had animated those eyes and suppressed a shudder.

“Will he be normal again when he wakes up?” Ghost asked.

“Why? What was he like when you met him in the woods?”

“Mad,” Ghost said instantly. “He didn’t seem to understand me at all... Like a wild animal.”

Torben's mouth tightened. "Perhaps his injuries made his mind desperate for a retreat from the pain. I've seen it happen to skin witches before..."

Ghost nodded, his suspicions confirmed. "But how did he manage to track me down in that state?"

"Animals are capable of anger, if not something as complex as hatred, which is an entirely human emotion. Perhaps in that altered state, all he had left to drive him was his rage..."

"Will he ever return to himself?"

"Some do... Others' minds are permanently warped. It's a risk we take when we put on the skin – it's a constant battle to stay in control. To subdue the beast within..."

"How do you fight it?" Ghost asked.

"You hold on to the things that make us human," Torben said. "Sympathy, compassion, love..." He looked at Tamira then, still crouched over her patient.

Ghost thought of his friend and how she had risked her life to save him. "I'd better go check on Nella," he excused himself.

#

He found Nella where he had left her on the cot, fast asleep. Without thinking, he lifted the quilt and lay down beside her. When he woke again, the cabin was immersed in shadow. There was a tinkling of pots and pans from the kitchen, where Torben was making dinner.

Ghost felt Nella stir behind him. "Something smells good," she said sleepily.

By the time they sat down for dinner, dusk had fallen in the clearing. Tamira joined them halfway through the meal. She looked tired and barely touched her bowl of vegetable soup.

“How is your patient?” Ghost asked. “Is he showing any signs of...” He broke off, not sure how to phrase it.

“Recognition?” Tamira shook her head. “I don’t think it’s likely that he ever will. Once you’ve surrendered your humanity, it’s difficult to regain it...”

“What will happen to him?” Nella asked softly. She still seemed guilty about injuring the man, even though it was in defense of his life.

Torben shrugged. “That’s for the Mayor of Topsfield to decide.”

“You’re going to take him to Topsfield?” Ghost asked, surprised.

“He is in no fit state to travel and won’t be for some time. But I’ll take a message in the meanwhile.”

“When will you ride?”

“In a day or two,” Torben said and glanced at the witch. “Tamira asked me to accompany you to Riverborne on the way. If that’s alright with you?”

“Of course!” Nella said. “We’ll be glad to have you.”

“But we can’t leave yet...” Ghost protested.

The witch gave him a considering look. “Have you made up your mind then?” she asked.

Nella looked at him, too, her hazel eyes full of expectation. Ghost realised that despite his objections, she believed he would do the right thing. He couldn’t bring himself to let her down.

“I’ll submit to the choosing,” he said.

#

The back door opened and Ghost looked up with a start. Tamira stood in the entrance way,

framed by darkness. The hood of her cloak was up and for the first time since they'd arrived, Ghost felt a little scared of her.

"The master is ready for you," she announced.

They followed the witch across the bridge to the wooden hut, her lantern casting a spectral reflection in the water below. She paused on the threshold of the cabin, turning to address them formally.

"You may enter one at a time. Once you have completed the trial, you may not speak of what occurred." Nella and Ghost looked at each other nervously. He didn't know if this was a test either of them really wanted to pass. "Good luck."

She left them standing there, alone in the dark. A shiver passed through Ghost and not just from the cold.

"Want to go first?" Nella asked, but Ghost knew it was only a courtesy.

"Go ahead," he said.

She stepped up to the door and knocked three times. There was a slight pause, and then a voice spoke from within.

"Who stands at the door?"

"One who seeks knowledge," came Nella's rehearsed answer.

"You may enter."

And then it was only Ghost left on the platform. He could not hear what was happening inside. Part of him was tempted to listen at the door, but he had to restrain himself. He began to pace up and down, as much out nervousness as a desire to stay warm. If Nella got chosen, he didn't know what he'd do. Life in Riverborne just wouldn't be the same without her... And he wouldn't be the only one to miss her. She had her aunt, and her friends

in the village – even her father, if they ever reconciled. He had no such ties to keep him there...

It was a moonless night and Ghost soon lost track of time. Just when he thought he couldn't wait any more, the door opened again. Nella came out looking pale and subdued.

"What happened?" Ghost asked, but she shook her head.

"I can't say."

He turned to stare at the door. A warm orange light was pouring from beneath it. He tried to focus on that light as he stepped forward.

"Who stands at the door?"

"One who seeks knowledge."

"You may enter."

Inside, the cabin was warm and there was a strong smell of rosemary in the air. Master Aelfred was seated by the stone hearth, a great fur thrown over his knees. A low table stood at his feet, its contents obscured by a white cloth.

Ghost went to kneel in front of him as Tamira had instructed.

"Why have you come?" the old man asked, his pale eyes glittering like opals in the light of the fire.

"I wish to serve," Ghost said.

"Then let us begin."

#

The master handed Ghost a strip of material and instructed him to cover his eyes. "A witch is distinguished by the ability to sense essence," the old man recited. "On the table before you, I have placed three bowls of herbs. I want you to touch each in turn and tell me what you feel."

Understand?”

Ghost nodded. It seemed simple enough.

“You may begin.”

Ghost reached forward and felt his fingers brush something dry and brittle. He took a handful of the herbs, crumpling it in his fist like old parchment... A warm glow filled his chest like when Burr would run out from the cottage to greet him. “I feel warm and safe, like I’m with a friend,” he said. “Someone I can trust. Who I can tell my deepest secrets to...”

He opened his hand and felt the warmth leak out of him. Without it, he was left feeling anxious and alone.

“Good,” the master said. “You may continue.”

This time he touched something delicate and soft like a butterfly’s wing. He felt the anxious feeling give way, as if a knot had been loosened in his chest. The faint pounding in his head subsided, replaced by a cool focus. “I feel clear-headed and calm,” he said. “As if any decision I make, would be the right one...”

“Excellent. Carry on.”

The last herb was downy and smooth, as though it had been freshly picked. Ghost immediately recognised the feeling of lightness that accompanied it. “Mugwort!” he exclaimed.

The master chuckled. “Indeed. Congratulations, you have passed the first test. You may remove the blindfold.”

Ghost slid it over his head with relief. His brow was slick with sweat and it came off easily.

“Bluebell, violet and mugwort,” Master Aelfred said, pointing to each bowl in turn.

“These three herbs are the chief ingredients in a powerful binding. Do you know it?”

Ghost bit his lip in concentration. If Maeve had ever mentioned it, he hadn't been paying attention. But there were bindings she considered too dangerous for them to learn yet. Perhaps it was one of those... “I don't know,” he admitted finally, hoping it wasn't part of the test.

“No matter. It is a rare binding, only ever used in trials - or the test to become an apprentice. Which brings us to our second task...”

The master held out a goblet and Ghost took it with a shaky hand. The contents of the cup was lukewarm and gave off a slightly sour aroma. He was not sure he wanted to drink it - and not just because of the smell. What if he was forced to spill his deepest secrets to the old man?

“Drink,” Master Aelfred instructed.

As expected, the liquid tasted bitter and he drained it quickly. It burnt as it went down, welling at the back of his throat.

“As a bone witch, you will learn the secrets of life and death,” the master said. “Some seek to use this knowledge for dark purposes. Tell me, Ghost, why are you here?”

Ghost was taken aback by the simplicity of the question. Surely the answer was obvious? “I'm here to pass the test to become an apprentice,” he replied unsure.

The master gave a patient smile. “That is what you are here to do, yes, but not why...”

Ghost thought for a moment. The back of his throat was still burning, so he cleared it before answering. “My village is under attack by a malevolent spirit,” he began. “I need to become Tamira's apprentice so she can tell me how to save them.”

The master looked on placidly, as though waiting for him to finish. Bile began

pushing up Ghost's throat, and he felt as though he was going to retch. Words came out instead.

"I'm here for my friend Nella," he heaved. "I don't want her to have to leave her family and friends." He collapsed onto his hands and knees, his body shaking with the effort to stem the flow of words. But they came out despite of him.

"I have no family or friends in the village besides Nella and Maeve. There's no - no place for me there. No future..."

As suddenly as it had come, the urgent feeling receded. When Ghost finally raised his face, it was wet with cold sweat. And tears, he realised to his shame.

The master handed him the cloth again and he quickly wiped his face.

"To sacrifice your life for a friend is noble," he said. "But to do so for an enemy is even greater. You have passed the test."

Ghost almost collapsed with relief. He felt completely drained, as though he had run a long distance.

"Are you ready to go on?" the master asked and he nodded quickly.

From inside his robes, the old man removed a small cloth pouch. With a deft movement, he cast its contents into the fire. The flames flared once in response and then subsided again.

"Now, look upon the fire and tell me what you see."

Ghost had a sudden vision of Nella lying on the cottage floor, racked by convulsions... He shook his head as if to clear away the image. You've come too far to turn back now, he told himself.

He stared into the flames until his eyes began to water, but nothing seemed to change.

Then he blinked and suddenly he was no longer in the hut, but in the middle of a small field. The village green, he realised with a shock. But where was everyone? The village was eerily silent, as though all of its residents were still asleep. But judging by the sun it was past noon already...

He walked in the direction of the nearest row of cottages and saw that one of the doors had been left ajar. Tentatively, he pushed it open. Inside a family of four were seated at a kitchen table. They didn't look up as Ghost entered. In fact, they didn't move at all. They sat frozen in place like statues of ice, their faces carved in identical expressions of horror. Ghost took a step back. And then another. Then he was running from cottage to cottage, opening doors. Everywhere he was greeted by the same nightmare scene.

Blink.

The vision changed and he was standing outside a small stone cottage. It had bright blue shutters and an arched doorway that was overgrown with honeysuckle. Smoke drifted from the chimney, signalling that its occupants were home. Despite the cheerful scene, Ghost was still wary as he opened the door. Inside the cottage was small but neat. A delicious smell came from the kitchen, where a woman stood by the stove. Ghost could only see the back of her long red hair, but there was something familiar about way she hummed to herself. She turned around and with a shock he realised that she was heavy with child...

Blink.

The woman and the cottage disappeared. He was standing in what looked like a valley of small green hills. In the middle of the nearest mound, there was what looked like a stone archway. Through it black hole gaped like the eye of some great beast... Ghost didn't know why, but the sight filled him with more dread than anything he had seen so far.

Blink.

And then he was back in the small room, kneeling in front of the fire.

“What was that?” Ghost blurted out, breaking form.

But the master did not reprimand him. “What did you see?”

“Lots of things! I saw the village covered in frost. I saw a red-haired woman. I saw a tunnel, in a valley of hills...” Ghost broke off. He understood what the first vision was, even the one with red-headed woman... But the last one confused him. “What was that place?” he asked.

“It is called *Násholm*. It is an ancient burial place of my people. It is where an apprentice goes for their trial to become a bone witch...”

“Does that mean...” Ghost began, afraid to go on. “That it’s me? I’m going to be a bone witch one day?”

“What you saw was a possible futures. But the difference between reality and potential is action.”

Ghost had to stop himself from rolling his eyes like Nella. Why did all witches speak in riddles? “What does that mean?”

“It means you have a choice.”

Ghost thought of the beautiful red-haired woman. But then the image of the frozen village came to him. “I have to do it,” he said at last. “I’m the only one who can save them.”

“Then it is decided.”

CHAPTER 13—BONDED

The bonding ceremony took place later that evening outside the master's cabin. As they waited for the old man, Ghost stole a look at Nella. They had not been alone since the choosing and he wondered what she was feeling; whether she was relieved, or sad, or even jealous that he had been chosen... But her face remained unreadable in the torchlight.

The master finally appeared in the doorway, wrapped in a goat-fur trimmed cloak that hid his fragile shape. He edged towards the water, leaning heavily on his walking stick. An animal skull was fixed to the top of the staff like a grisly lantern. Ghost felt its empty sockets staring at him, as the old man began his address.

“You have been called tonight to witness the bonding of Tamira dol Mari and Ghost of Riverborne as master and apprentice,” he began. “Tamira, do you swear to share your knowledge with Ghost, to instruct him to the best of your abilities, and never knowingly lead him astray?”

“I swear on the blood of Ida, which flows through my veins.” From the folds of her cloak, the witch produced a dagger and traced it across her palm. A red line appeared, marking her promise.

The master turned his pale gaze to Ghost. “Do you swear to keep the secrets of a bone witch, to use your knowledge in the service of the living, and to obey your mistress until death or her command releases you from your bond?”

Ghost swallowed nervously; his mouth felt very dry all of a sudden. “I swear by the blood of Ida, which runs through my veins.”

Tamira handed him the blade, still wet with her own blood. Quickly, he drew it across his palm before he lost his nerve.

“Join hands,” the master said and the witch obeyed, taking Ghost’s hand into her own. He felt his face grow warm at the touch and fixed his gaze in front of him.

“In the name of Dajana, I declare you master and apprentice. May the goddess bless your bond.” Tamira stepped forward to help the Master, and Ghost withdrew his hand in relief. Slowly, she began to lead the old man back to his cabin.

Torben came over to clap Ghost on the shoulder. “Well done,” he said before he, too, turned to follow.

And then it was just Nella and Ghost left on the platform. He remembered their fight earlier that day on the same spot. It felt like a lifetime ago... For a moment, an uncomfortable silence hung in the air.

“Does it hurt?” Nella asked, gesturing at his hand.

“Only a little.”

“Give it here,” she said and he held it out obediently. From inside her apron, she took

a handkerchief and wrapped it around the cut. Ghost saw it was her favourite, the one embroidered with purple violets.

“I’m sorry,” Ghost said, about the spoilt handkerchief and everything else.

Nella shrugged. “It’s not your fault Ghost. It’s who you are. Don’t apologise for it.”

“Still, you should’ve been chosen. You’re far better at witchery than I am...”

Nella was quiet, fiddling with the knot. “To be honest, I’m a little relieved,” she admitted. “I don’t think I’m supposed to be a bone witch. I want to be a healer, like my aunt... Besides, I’m not sure I’m ready to leave Riverborne yet.”

“I don’t know if I’m either.”

She looked up then and Ghost saw that there were tears in her eyes. For a moment, he thought she might cry but then she seemed to pull herself together. “Well, you can’t think about leaving yet,” she said with forced bravado. “We have work to do first.”

Ghost nodded. The prospect loomed before him like a giant, unscalable mountain. I will worry about it when I there, he told himself firmly, shoving the fear down deep inside of him.

#

Ghost met Tamira the next morning in the tanning shed for his first lesson. Yarrick had been moved to the sick bay and the space was empty again, except for the rack of drying fish and an old trunk that Ghost hadn’t noticed before. Tamira went straight to the chest and removed a roll of cloth from inside. She knelt on the floor and spread it out on the planks before her. Inside the parcel was a collection of items, stored in separate pockets: a dagger, a leather pouch, and a tin box.

“What’s all this?” Ghost asked.

“The tools of a bone witch,” Tamira said and handed the dagger to Ghost. The blade was unlike any he had seen before, undulating like the coils of a snake. He turned it around in his fingers, admiring the pattern on its surface.

“It’s called a *kalis*. The blade is made of an alloy of nickel and iron.”

“What’s it for?”

“In witchery, iron can be used to break bindings. It’s not much help against pure essence or spirit, but useful when it comes to possession.”

“Possession?” Ghost asked. He had heard whispers of such things, but had not believed it possible.

“When a spirit latches onto the essence or soul of a living human. Iron will break its tether and drive the spirit out.”

The witch must’ve seen more questions forming on his lips, because she quickly forestalled him. “But we are not dealing with one of the possessed here.” She threw him the leather pouch and he looked inside. “Salt,” he said, surprised.

“Like iron, salt represents the element earth. A circle of salt can contain a spirit – for a time at least...”

“Like at a funeral...”

“Precisely.” She handed him the small tin box, which turned out to be a kindling kit.

“The bones or remains is what tethers a spirit to the world of the living. If we burn the body, we destroy that link.”

Ghost frowned. “So we have to find the maiden’s bones and – burn them?”

“That’s one way to do it.”

“But how? We have no idea who she was, or where she’s buried...”

“That is the difficulty,” Tamira said. “I can show you a binding to locate her remains, but you need something of hers to find them... Something that contains a bit of her essence like an old hairbrush, or a beloved piece of clothing.”

“But that’s impossible!” Ghost exclaimed. If they didn’t know her true identity, then how could they even begin to find such a thing?

Tamira held up a hand to slow his panic. “There is another way... The role of a bone witch is to lay the dead to rest. If you find out what your maiden wants, then perhaps you can help her find peace.”

“How do I do that?” Ghost asked, the spark of hope reigniting in his chest.

“You ask her,” the witch said simply. “I will show you the binding to summon a spirit.”

“Is that wise?” Ghost asked, unsure. “She has proven to be very dangerous to those who encounter her.” Except for me, he thought wryly.

“That’s why you must take the necessary precautions.” Tamira rose and opened the trunk again, removing what looked like a black leather jerkin from inside. She held it up for Ghost, who accepted the garment uncertainly. “It’s a little big. But you’ll grow into it... The leather is treated with a binding to protect the wearer against the cold that radiates from a spirit.”

The rest of the day was spent learning the necessary bindings and being instructed in the duties of a bone witch. It was a lot to take in and Ghost was unsure that his head could contain everything. The witch also tested his knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs. Even though Were Clans had wood witches of their own, a bone witch was expected to ease the passing of the old and infirm.

Ghost was surprised at how much he had absorbed from Maeve over the years. He had never really applied himself the way Nella did – witchery had always been another thing that made him different from others, and he had not been keen to deepen that divide. The witch seemed to sense this reluctance in him. When Torben came to call them for dinner, she asked Ghost to stay behind.

“I know this is not the future you imagined for yourself,” she began. “But sometimes our destiny chooses us – not the other way around...”

Ghost didn’t know how to respond. He didn’t want to offend his new mistress, so he chose his words carefully. “It’s just – I had always hoped – to have a normal life one day...”

“I understand,” Tamira said with something like recognition in her brown eyes. “But never confuse normality with happiness, Ghost. We witches exist on the outskirts, it’s true. There is loneliness in that position, but freedom, too.”

#

For dinner that night, Torben and Nella had prepared a small feast. Ghost gorged himself on roast venison and root vegetables. Torben even produced a bottle of nettle wine from somewhere. Nella and Ghost were allowed a glass each, but it was heavily watered down. Afterwards, Torben amused them with a story of a petty thief he had caught in Highgard, who fell asleep in the house he was busy robbing.

Ghost didn’t want the night to end, but the fire was warm and his belly was full, and soon he was fighting back the yawns. No-one protested when Tamira finally announced it was time for bed. Ghost had barely dozed off when he was wrested from the arms of sleep. He opened his eyes just in time to duck an elbow from Nella. The girl thrashed next to him, muttering in her sleep.

“Nella! Wake up!” he said, trying to wrestle her arms to her sides.

Torben was suddenly next to him. “What’s going on?”

“She’s having a vision. Quickly, I need a bucket!”

He got one from the kitchen and handed it to Ghost, who promptly upended it over the girl. Nella came to with a gasp, as though emerging from deep waters.

“Wh-what’s going on,” she spluttered.

“You had a vision again,” Ghost said.

She blinked slowly as if trying to clear her head. “I dreamt that I was in the kitchen in the Queen’s Arms... A man was asleep in the storeroom. He must’ve sensed that something wasn’t right because he woke up suddenly. But before he could scream, ice began to spread across his throat, choking him-” she cut off, too horrified to continue.

“Did you recognise the man?” Ghost asked.

She nodded. “It was that brute Baine, the one who came to get Maeve. I recognise him from the village...”

At the mention of the witch’s name, Ghost sat up straighter. “Didn’t Elaine say Maeve is being kept at the Queen’s Arms? Did you see her? Or anyone else?” he added, thinking of the Millers.

Nella shook her head, looking worried. “No. But we need to hurry, Ghost. We’re running out of time.”

CHAPTER 14–THE JOURNEY BACK

Ghost had trouble going back to sleep after Nella's vision. Every time she shifted next to him he would start, until he gave up entirely. He lay thinking about Wynna instead, and what her motive could've been for attacking Baine. The man had been a close friend of Tristan Blackthorn and had even tried to avenge his death. The mayor had to be at the centre of the mystery... All of the signs pointed to it.

It was a sombre group that gathered for breakfast in the morning. Ghost tried and failed to suppress a yawn; he had no idea how he would make it through a day of hard riding.

"Your aunt can't be much of a cook if you're this reluctant to leave my table," Tamira said in an attempt to lighten the mood. "What's wrong?" she asked when no-one responded.

"I know you have a daunting task ahead of you–"

"It's not that," Ghost said, shooting a glance at Nella.

The girl sighed, lowering her spoon. "I had a vision again."

She repeated what she had told them the night before. When she finished, Tamira's eyes came to rest on Ghost. "We must not delay any further," she said. "You must leave today..."

Torben left to saddle Star, as Nella and Ghost gathered the last of their belongings. Tamira had laid the toolkit and leather jerkin on the bed for Ghost to pack. On an impulse, he took the vest and shrugged it on over his tunic. It was a bit long and wide in the chest, but otherwise it fit perfectly. Still, he felt a little foolish wearing it, like a mummer in a play.

"What's that?" Nella asked from behind him.

"Tamira gave it to me," Ghost said, tugging at the hem. "It's a bit big..."

Nella looked him over. "I think it fits you perfectly," she concluded.

Ghost tied the iron dagger to his belt, but put the pouch and tin box in his saddle bags. The master was waiting for them outside the cabin. He looked so fragile standing there, propped up on his walking stick, as if a gust of wind could blow him away. Nella must've thought the same, for she ran forward and put her arms around him.

"Thank you," she said. "For everything..." The old man looked taken aback for a moment, but then he smiled and gently patted her on the back. She let go of him and moved on to Tamira, who returned her embrace more readily.

"Thanks," Ghost repeated awkwardly. He made to turn but the master clasped his shoulder with a bony hand, his grip surprisingly firm.

"Remember," he said. "You can save them. But they can't save you."

He let go and Ghost stumbled away in relief.

Tamira stood waiting for him, her arms folded in her shawl. "I wish I could come with you to Riverborne," she began, "But I have faith in you. Trust Torben, he is a good man and

an even better warrior... He will see you safely back to me.”

Ghost nodded, unsure what to say. “Until then,” he managed.

The witch smiled and her arm twitched as if she wanted to reach forward, but then thought better of it. “Until then.”

#

It felt strange being back on Star again. So much had passed since they arrived at the witch’s cabin. Had they really only been there for three days? He wished that he had more time to prepare for what lay ahead. But he knew that even if he had weeks, or months even, he wouldn’t be any readier than he was now.

Back on the path, they headed west in the direction of Lynden. Torben didn’t want to risk any further encounters with Ravencloak’s men, so they would take the River Road back home.

“Is it safe to leave Tamira alone?” Nella asked. “With such dangers lurking in the forest?”

But Torben only chuckled. “She’ll be fine, don’t worry. Tamira doesn’t need a crossbow to defend herself.”

“Really?” Ghost asked, curious about his new mistress.

“Yes. All wellborn Mari children are trained from a young age in the art of knife duelling.”

On their insistence, Torben spent the rest of the ride explaining the finer points. Duels were fought with twin daggers or *kalis*, which children were gifted on their sixteenth nameday. Before that, they would practice with wooden training knives. Ghost was shocked to learn that both men and women fought shirtless – a fact that seemed to amuse Nella to no

end. It was said to decrease the risk of a cut becoming infected, but Ghost remained sceptical.

After an hour or so of riding, the trees gave way to a field that bordered a swift-flowing river. A collection of whitewashed cottages were scattered along its bank, as though they had sprung up at random. In between the houses, villagers went about their business, unperturbed by the sudden appearance of three strangers in their midst. Ghost supposed that they were used to travellers from the Forest Road. Not even the giant figure of Torben drew more than a polite nod or a wave from them.

They made their way to the edge of the village, where they stopped at one of the outlying cottages. A matronly woman emerged from the door, wiping her hands on an apron. Upon seeing Torben, her eyes widened in disbelief.

“Bless my hearth, if it isn’t Torben!”

“Morning, Agnes.”

“We haven’t seen you in these parts for ages! Have you been to see Mistress Tamira?”

“Actually, I’ve just come from there. She asked me to see these two safely back home.”

Agnes regarded them with an air of motherly disapproval. “Runaways?” she asked.

“Not quite. The boy is going to be Tamira’s new apprentice.”

The woman’s expression immediately softened. “Welcome,” she said and pressed Ghost to her bosom before he could object. “Any friend of Tamira’s is a friend of the Barleys. You must join us for lunch!”

“Unfortunately, we can’t stay,” Torben said. “I was actually hoping to talk to Tom-”

As if summoned, a man appeared in the door behind Agnes. A good head shorter than

his wife, he the same round, red-cheeked face.

“Torben, my friend!” he exclaimed. “What brings the Bear of the North to our door?”

Torben quickly explained his errand and asked the man for his assistance.

“Of course,” Tom agreed. “My Bess is at your disposal.”

Bess turned out to be the name of a giant dun mare that the Barleys kept in a field behind their cottage. Ghost took one look at the horse’s muscular legs and saw why Torben chose her for his steed. He tried to haggle with Tom, but the man would not accept payment for the loan.

“After everything you’ve done for us, it’s the least I can do.”

#

“They seemed kind,” Nella said as they rode away. Mrs Barley had insisted on sending them off with what felt like half her pantry.

“They are good people,” Torben agreed. For a man of his stature, he looked surprisingly comfortable in the saddle. Ghost had heard that most of the Were didn’t favour horses – except for the clan on the plains – but Torben was clearly an experienced rider.

“What did they mean by ‘everything you’ve done for them’?” he asked.

“I came to their aid a few years ago,” Torben said vaguely. When they both kept staring at him, he sighed and continued. “Children kept disappearing from the village so they asked me to investigate. They thought perhaps that it was one of the Unbound... It turned out to be a man from the village, under the influence of a malevolent spirit. Tamira and I captured him and put an end to it. She’s been here ever since.”

“So you’ve got experience with these kind of things?”

“More than I’d like,” Torben admitted with a grimace.

Ghost was suddenly very glad to have the big Northman with them. With his help, perhaps they stood a chance against Wynna after all.

#

They followed the River Road as it wound over hills and dales. At first it was a gradual rise and fall, but the fabric of the land became increasingly wrinkled. As the sun began to sink, mist gathered in the folds until the air was thick with it.

They made camp on top of a small hill, inside a copse of trees. It provided enough shelter that Torben agreed to risk a fire.

“It’s not wise to give away your position in the wild,” he cautioned. “There are certain predators that a fire won’t guard against...” Ghost thought of the two wolves and had to agree.

After a dinner of roast chicken and garlic buns, Nella changed the bandages on Ghost’s arm. The burns were healing fast, thanks to the poultice she applied twice a day. While they were busy, Torben had begun to sharpen his axe. The blade sang out as he drew the whetstone along its edge in short, sharp motions.

“I saw you in the fire,” Nella said abruptly. “During the Choosing. You had a different axe, though – gold, with moonstones in the hilt...”

Torben stilled for a moment. “You shouldn’t speak of the Choosing,” he said gruffly, returning to his task.

Ghost thought about what he had seen in the fire that night. With the excitement of the bonding and his lesson with Tamira, he had had little time to consider it. In his mind’s eye, he saw the black hole gaping beneath the hill and suppressed a shudder.

“What is *Násholm*?” he asked. The sound of the whetstone stopped again. “The

master said it was a burial place. But don't the Were burn their dead?"

Torben didn't answer immediately. "We burn our dead," he began. "But there are exceptions. Traitors and thieves, too wicked to have earned a peaceful respite..."

"How bad must you have been to deserve that?" Nella asked, sounding shocked.

"Very," Torben said. "As far as I know, no-one's been buried there for twenty years..."

Ghost frowned at this revelation. Then why was there an empty grave in his vision? But he didn't say anything, for fear of being told off again.

Nella took advantage of the Northman's unusual candour. "Why did you leave your clan?"

Torben blinked, caught off guard by the new line of questioning. "I used my powers as a skin witch to save a young woman's life," he said after a brief pause. His voice was matter-of-fact, like a soldier reporting back to his commander. "According to our laws, it can only be used in defence of your own life or that of a member of your clan. I was banished as a result..."

Nella's mouth fell open in disbelief. "But that is so unfair! What were you supposed to do – let her die?"

"It is the law," Torben said in the same emotionless voice.

The law can be manipulated to serve one's own ends, Ghost thought. He remembered Maeve's trial then and felt a stab of fear. He knew the witch was innocent but would it be enough? Would a magistrate believe a story about a spirit over a flesh-and-blood suspect? *I'm old enough and ugly enough to take care of myself*, the witch's words echoed in his head. He hoped with all of his heart that it was true.

CHAPTER 15—THE QUEEN’S ARMS

After a day’s ride, the land began to flatten out. A tapestry of fields unfurled before them, bordered by trees more often than man-made hedge. Few chose to live in the shadow of the forest, and they met hardly any travellers on the road that day. Once they left the hills behind, they began to make good time. This was cut short on the third day when it started to rain, and it was after nightfall when they finally reached the mill. They could see the ruins from a distance, reaching up from the trees like broken fingers.

On the way to the mill, they passed through a field of stones. Upon closer inspection, though, Ghost realised what he had mistook at first for rocks were the remains of cottages. They were riding through the bones of what once was Milltown. The realisation sent a chill down Ghost’s spine. He felt as if invisible eyes were watching him from inside the ruins and he urged Star forward. Only when they reached the shelter of the trees, did he allow her to slow down.

The mill was just as they had left it a week ago. They found a dry corner where the roof had only partially collapsed and set about making a fire. It was more for the heat than cooking, as they were back to rations of hard bread and cheese. The warmth slowly returned to Ghost's limbs, which were stiff and cold from the day's ride.

"So, what's the plan?" Nella asked.

Up till now, Ghost had been vague on what to do once they reached the village. Not because he wasn't allowed to share what Tamira had told him, though that was certainly part of it. But because he wasn't sure where to start. What if they got there and Maeve was already gone? They needed to find out what had happened since they'd left.

"We'll go to Queen's Arms first," he said, making a decision on the spot. "Make sure that Maeve is all right, and get the lay of the land..."

Torben nodded his approval. "That is a smart course of action."

"Who knows, she may even know something that could help us." They still had no clue as to Wynna's identity. Anything they could learn about her past could potentially help. They needed to figure out what her end goal was – and stop her before she could complete it.

#

The roads were muddy the next day and their pace was slow. There were more people about this close to the valley, and they had to pull over a few times to avoid other travellers. Baine might be gone but that didn't mean no-one was looking for them... The day grew colder and darker as they drew closer to the mountains. When they reached the bridge later that afternoon, it had begun to drizzle. Torben rode ahead to see if it was safe to cross, but there was no-one waiting for them this time around.

Ghost remembered how Fineas had let them pass the last time. He and Nella never did

discuss her father's apparent act of mercy. He tried to glimpse her expression, but she stared ahead of her blankly. She looked pale and tired, probably anxious to see her aunt. Now that they were this close, Ghost felt his own worry rise up inside him again. They couldn't be discovered before they achieved their purpose. Too much depended on it...

They waited for the cover of darkness before they slipped into the valley. Torben would stay behind in the woods with the horses, while Nella and Ghost snuck into the village. The big Northman and his mount were far too conspicuous to go unnoticed. They stayed off the road, cutting through hedges and gardens of outlying cottages, until they reached a small concentration of lights: Riverborne.

The streets of the village were empty at this hour, as everyone was inside for the evening meal. They kept to the shadows, avoiding the light spilling from windows and shutters. Nella took the lead, weaving through side streets and back alleys with the confidence of a stray cat. Ghost followed behind her, less certain. What would the villagers do if they found them sneaking around in the dark? Would they hand them over to Baine's cronies to be used against Maeve?

After what felt like hours, they reached the biggest source of light. On a night like this, the Queen's Arms would usually be bustling with patrons. But luckily for them, the taproom appeared to be closed. They snuck around the back and listened at the door, but everything was quiet inside.

"What now?" Nella asked.

Ghost raised his fist and rapped the door twice. They leaned forward to listen again, but all was silent on the other side. Ghost was about to knock once more when they heard footsteps coming towards the door.

“What do they want now...” A woman muttered from the other side. There was the sound of a lock turning and the door swung open.

Elaine froze at the sight of them but then seemed to recollect herself. “You two!” she hissed. “What are you doing here?”

“Who’s there?” a voice came from somewhere inside the kitchen.

“Just old Martin,” Elaine said with a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Begging for scraps.”

“Feed him and be done with it. I’m starving meself.”

Elaine shooed them back outside and shut the door behind her.

“Who was that?” Ghost asked as they followed her across the courtyard to the stables.

“Croft. He’s the guard on duty tonight.”

“So Maeve is still here?” Nella asked, sounding hopeful.

“Yes, for the time being. The magistrate should be arriving any day now...” Nella and Ghost shared an anxious look.

“Now, where have you been? Angus said you lost him at the Mill-”

“It’s a long story,” Ghost cut her off. “The important part is we know how to stop the attacks - but we need Maeve’s help.”

Elaine’s eyes narrowed, as though she wanted to interrogate him further. But the presence of Croft in the kitchen seemed to keep her from asking too many questions.

“Very well,” she relented. “Do you have any more of that sleeping tonic you gave Angus?”

Ghost shifted guiltily but Nella reached into her satchel to remove a vial.

“Good. Stay here,” Elaine instructed. “I’ll come get you when coast is clear.” She

hurried back to the inn, clutching her skirts.

#

They settled back into the straw as they waited for the innkeeper to return. Ghost wondered where she was keeping Burr - the dog wouldn't stand to be around Baine's cronies. Perhaps he was locked in one of the upstairs rooms... Ghost wished that he could go and see him. At least the animal would be happy to see them, which was more than he could say for any of the villagers.

"At least she's safe," Nella said.

For now, Ghost thought but didn't say anything. Minutes passed in silence until they heard the back door open and footsteps hurry across the flagstones.

"Come," Elaine said.

She ushered them across the courtyard and into the kitchen. A delicious smell came from the direction of the stove, but Elaine steered them past and into the pantry. Inside the small store, a heavy-set man was slumped on top of a stool. A goblet lay next to him on the floor, as though it had slipped from his grasp.

"Help me move him," Elaine said. Together, she and Ghost heaved the man off the chair and into a corner. It turned out he had been sitting on top of a hatch in the floor. Elaine took a key from Croft's belt, and used it to unlock the door.

"Down there," she said. "You'll have some time before the next watch start." She gave Croft a prod with her foot. "If this one doesn't wake up first."

"Thanks," Ghost said but she waved them down. "Go."

They followed the stairs down to a narrow corridor, which ended in a heavy oak door. Ghost pushed it open, revealing another passage. Two rows of bars ran down either side,

rusted with age and neglect.

Nella gasped. “What is this place?”

“It must’ve been a dungeon of sorts, back when the inn was still a Lord’s manor...”

He raised the lantern, illuminating the inside of the cells. There was a sudden movement to his right, as something recoiled from the light.

“Careful where you point that, boy,” a familiar voice rasped.

“Maeve!” they both cried, rushing forward.

The witch leaned back on her pallet, raising a hand to shield her face. “Easy,” she repeated.

“We’ve been so worried!”

“How are you?”

“Fine, fine,” she said, lowering her arm. She blinked a couple of times until her eyes seem to adjust to the light. “Better question is, how are you? Elaine told me you managed to give poor Angus the slip.”

“We had to-”

“We went to see the bone witch-”

“Slow down,” Maeve chided. “One at a time.”

While Nella began the story of their journey, Ghost studied the old witch. She had lost some weight, and her grey hair was lank and unwashed, but seemed otherwise unharmed. She caught him staring at her and he quickly looked away. When Nella reached the part about the choosing, she stopped and turned to Ghost.

“So, you’ve found yourself a new mistress,” Maeve said. “Think the old one is done for?”

“I didn’t have a choice-” Ghost began, but she stopped him.

“It’s alright, I’m only teasing. You did what you had to do. Gods know, we’ll all have to make some difficult choices before this is through...” He nodded, not knowing what to say.

“So, did your bone witch tell you how to get rid of our maiden?”

Ghost swallowed. “We have to summon her. Find out what it is she wants...”

“We have theory,” Nella said quickly and explained about Tristan and Wynna.

The witch was quiet, mulling things over. “I’ve done some thinking myself this past week. No one by the name of Wynna has lived in the village, but there was a girl who matched her description, by the name of Morwyn. She went missing about thirteen years ago. Her father thought she’d run away - he was a hard man and she was under his thumb...”

“So, you think she didn’t really disappear?” Ghost asked.

“There have been rumours for years about the woods... I’ve always dismissed it as superstition, but what if there’s some truth to it? ”

“Do you think that’s where Wynna - Morwyn - is buried?” Nella whispered.

“I think that it’s a good place to start your search...”

“Ghost!” Elaine’s voice echoed down the chamber.

“Time to go,” he told Nella.

“Wait!” Maeve called. “Take this, for protection...” She removed her necklace of nails and held it out to her niece.

Nella took it through the bars, gripping the old woman’s hand . “We’ll be back soon,” she promised.

“I hope so,” Maeve said dryly. “I’m an excellent conversationalist, but even I tire of my own company.”

#

Torben was waiting for them on the edge of the woods. In the dark, all of the trees looked the same and it took them awhile to find the right spot.

“Were you seen?” he asked as they stumbled into the clearing.

“I don’t think so,” Ghost said.

“The amount of noise you were making, I’m surprised half of the village didn’t follow you back...”

“We can’t all see in the dark,” Nella said and he barked a laugh.

“This way.” They followed him through the trees, his torch drifting ahead like a will-o’-wisp. After a short hike, they reached a rocky outcropping of sorts. Torben had already set up camp in the cave beneath. Ghost’s stomach gave a reflexive growl at the sight of the campfire; they hadn’t eaten since that morning and he was starving.

Nella opened her satchel and took out a loaf of bread and some apples. “I swiped it from the kitchen before we left,” she explained and Ghost thought he could kiss her.

“So what did your mistress say?” Torben asked as she passed around the food. So they told him about the village girl who had gone missing thirteen years ago.

“And she thinks this is the same young woman who is behind the attacks?”

“It fits the timeline,” Ghost said. “She vanished a year after Tristan Blackthorn returned to the village with his bride.”

There was a sudden noise from the mouth of the cave.

“What was that?” Ghost asked, half rising to his feet. Instinctively, he reached for the iron dagger at his side.

But Torben remained seated. “You can come out now, boy,” he said in an even tone.

There was a pause and then a pale figure rose from behind a boulder.

Nella gasped. "You!"

"A friend of yours?" Torben asked, eyeing the boy up and down.

"Hardly," Ghost said. "This is Alain Blackthorn, Tristan's son."

CHAPTER 16—A CIRCLE OF SALT

Alain's pale features were flushed with anger at being discovered. He ignored Nella and Ghost, fixing Torben with a defiant stare. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Never mind *him*," Nella said before Torben could answer. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I saw you sneaking out of the village, and thought I'd see what you were up to..."

The girl crossed her arms. "We could ask you the same. Lurking in the dark, spying on people..."

"I wasn't lurking! I was—" but he cut off, his face turning even redder. Ghost thought he knew why.

"You've been looking for them," he said. "The person who attacked your parents." Alain glared at Ghost, but did not deny it.

"Have you seen anything useful?" Nella asked, sounding sceptical.

The boy looked at his feet. “Nothing,” he admitted. “The old witch was locked away when Baine was attacked. Why would she break out, just to return to her cell?”

“So you don’t think she did it?” Ghost asked eagerly. If Alain didn’t think Maeve was responsible, then maybe others would believe it, too.

The boy gave him a long stare, then shook his head. “Who was the woman you were talking about? What does she have to do with what happened to my parents?”

Ghost turned to Nella, unsure of how much of their suspicions to share. So he repeated what Maeve had told them about the missing girl and how they thought she was the one haunting the village.

“But what was her connection to my parents?” Alain asked again.

Nella opened her mouth, but Ghost forestalled her. “We don’t know what she’s after. All we know is that we have to stop her.”

“How do we do that?”

“We?” Nella raised a brow.

“They killed my parents,” Alain said quietly. “I have a right to be part of this.”

“The boy is right,” Torben said, surprising them all. “Either way, we can’t let him go. He knows too much...”

Ghost supposed that it wouldn’t hurt to have another pair of ears and eyes... Alain could see that they weren’t lying about Wynna and tell the rest of the villagers.

“We need to perform a summoning,” he said.

#

They were up early the next morning, just as a grey light began to creep into the cave. The dark crescents beneath Alain’s eyes told Ghost that the boy had gotten hardly any sleep the

night before. After he had explained about the summoning, Alain wanted him to perform it straightaway. But Torben had insisted that they rest first and make the necessary preparations. They would need wormwood to complete the ritual and there was only one place they were sure to find it...

As they made their way through the trees, Ghost thought it was strangely silent. This time of the morning, the forest was usually alive with activity. But a blanket of mist lay over everything, dampening all sounds of life. At least it worked to their advantage, muffling the noise of their passage.

The shape of the cottage looked strange at first, seen through the haze of mist. But as they came closer, Ghost could make out its familiar features and his heart gave a pang. Home. But no Burr came running out as they approached the door. Inside, the cottage felt empty and cold like a forgotten tomb. Broken furniture and objects littered the floor and Ghost thought the men must've come back again after they'd left.

Alain was looking around with curiosity and Ghost realised he had never been inside the witch's cottage before. It must be more mundane than he had imagined, like any other house in the valley, except for one feature: Ghost headed straight for the trapdoor, which was still hidden beneath the rug. The men must not have found it during their second search.

"Bunch of blind fools," Nella said, sounding so much like her aunt that Ghost almost smiled. The others kept watch as he and Nella descended the stairs to the cellar. The girl went straight for the shelves of herbs, while Ghost located a bag of salt in the corner.

"Did you get everything you need?" Torben asked as they emerged again.

Ghost nodded. He looked around the room one last time, his heart as heavy as the bag of salt in his cloak. Who knows when they would be back again? Nella seemed to feel the

same.

“Goodbye, home,” she said sadly, before shutting the door behind them.

#

They were silent on the trek back, mirroring their surroundings. Mist still lingered in place, growing bold before the diminished sun. Back at the cave, Torben and Nella left in search of food. Ghost wished that he could go, too, but someone had to keep an eye on Alain. Their task was hard enough without him telling half of the village where they were hiding. Ghost studied the boy where he stood by the opening of the cave. He seemed subdued somehow, as if his outer layer of arrogance had been stripped away.

Ghost went to stand in the entrance next to him. “We should stay out of sight.”

Alain gave a reluctant nod and followed him back to the fire. They had to stay hidden until nightfall, when they would perform the summoning.

Ghost took out his whetstone and began sharpening his dagger like Torben had shown him. It would be little use against a spirit, but it gave him something to do to pass the time. He felt Alain watching him and looked up.

“Unusual dagger you have there...”

“Want to see?” Ghost held out the hilt.

The boy took the blade, examining it closely. His hands were elegant and long-fingered – belonging more to a bard than a blacksmith.

“Did you study with your father?”

“A little, though he said I had no aptitude for it.” He scowled at the blade, as though angry at his reflection.

Ghost did not know what to say. Why was the boy confiding in him?

“I’m sorry.”

Alain shrugged off his sympathy. “Where did you get it?” he asked. “I don’t recognise the work.”

“It’s a long story...”

The boy raised a brow. “If only we weren’t stuck in the woods, with nothing to do...”

Ghost would’ve laughed if he hadn’t been so shocked that he had made a joke. “Very well.”

He began with the bone witch and worked his way back to his meeting with Morwyn. He didn’t mention the telling fire, though, as he didn’t want to get Nella into trouble. Alain listened quietly, his dark eyes thoughtful. To Ghost’s relief, he didn’t ask any more questions about his father.

“So, you’re going back to this woman – the bone witch – after...?”

Ghost nodded.

“Why? I thought you’d want to stay with your friend...”

“It’s for the best,” Ghost said, looking at his feet.

The boy fell silent again, so he returned to sharpening his dagger. Hours passed but still they waited for the others to come back. Ghost soon became restless and kept going through the satchel to check on their supplies. Alain had dozed off earlier, so there was no one to distract him. He was about to fall asleep himself, when a familiar noise shook him awake. It couldn’t be. In a flash, he was on his feet, peering out of the cave. A grey shape came barrelling out of trees, heading straight for him. It launched at Ghost, knocking him off his feet.

“Burr!” Ghost laughed, as the dog began to lick his face. “I’ve missed you, too, boy.”

Torben and Nella appeared from between the trees, smiling at the display of affection. Behind them came the lanky figure of Angus.

Ghost broke free of the dog and got to his feet. "Angus! What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you needed any help."

Ghost felt a stab of guilt. "Listen, I'm sorry about before, at the Mill--"

"S all right, my ma explained everything. You did what you had to do." He gave a reassuring smile and Ghost grinned back at him. "Besides, Star never did like that wagon..."

Alain emerged from the cave rubbing his eyes, but Angus did not seem surprised to see him. Nella must've filled him in on the way over.

"Who's hungry?" Torben asked and was met with an enthusiastic response.

#

The shadows were long when they began their hike back through the woods. There had been much debate around where the summoning should be performed. Ghost thought the best place would be where he first encountered Morwyn. He had no problem locating the old oak tree at the base of the hill; low branches sprouted from the trunk like the legs of a giant spider.

"This is the place," he said, swallowing.

"What now?" Alain asked.

"We make the circle." The group huddled together as Ghost walked around them, drawing a ring of salt in the earth. "This is a circle of protection," he said. "It should guard us against Morwyn's powers. No matter what happens, don't break it. Understood?" They nodded in agreement. Angus pulled Burr's leash a little tighter and the dog gave a soft whine.

Ghost looked at Torben, who nodded at the unspoken order. It felt strange to give the

older man commands, but he performed it without comment. In no time, he had a fire going from the parcel of yew twigs they'd gathered earlier that afternoon. It burned brightly amongst the dark trees, a beacon in the gathering dusk.

When the flames had died down a bit, Ghost took the jar of wormwood from his pocket. His hand shook a little as he emptied it into the waiting fire. Was it his imagination or did the flames suddenly burn brighter? He turned to the tree, half expecting the maiden to appear immediately. But there was no sudden gleam of white in the shadow.

They waited in silence as the flames burned lower... Darkness fell around them and soon they were glad of the fire. Mist rose around them, but kept a wide berth around the circle. Occasionally, a tendril would drift towards it, as though testing the boundary.

"Are you s-sure you did it right?" Nella shivered next to him.

"I did as Tamira instructed," Ghost countered but doubt crept into his voice. Maybe he had missed a step. Maybe this wasn't the spot after all... He was about to admit defeat, when he felt goosebumps erupt all over his skin. Burr, who had been lying down a moment ago, was on his feet – hackles raised.

And then he saw her – a shadow in the fog. She stepped forward and the mists parted around her like water, revealing her silk-clad shape. Behind him, Burr gave a low growl.

The maiden smiled at their terrified faces. "Good evening," she said in a voice like poisoned honey. "What brings you to my wood?"

"It's not your wood!" Nella said, the first to react. "My aunt is its keeper."

Morwyn turned to look at the girl, her dark eyes glittering. "I don't see her here."

"That is because she's locked up for your crimes!"

"Don't worry. Soon everyone will know who is responsible. Of course, they will be

dead by then...”

Ghost stepped forward. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

But she did not seem to hear him. Her eyes were fixed on the spot behind him. “What did they ever do to you?” he persisted.

Slowly, she tore her gaze away. “They took everything from me.”

“Who did? Tristan?”

“He promised to marry me,” she said, her eyes growing distant. “Then he returned from Topsfield, betrothed to that chit. But when he had to choose...” The mist began churn around her like a cauldron that was stirred. “When he found out I was with child, he forced me to give it away. Said it would have a better life with him. His new wife could not conceive...”

“That’s not true,” Ghost said. “They had a son-” But he cut off as he remembered Nella’s words at the funeral. *He’s not their real son.* He turned to Alain, who was staring at the maiden with dawning horror on his face. “It can’t be...”

The boy shook his head, taking a step backwards. “No,” he said. “It’s not possible.”

“It’s true.” She stared at Alain with barely suppressed longing. “You are my son.”

“You’re lying. I don’t believe you!”

“I don’t blame you. I should never have given you up,” a bitter note entered her voice. “I regretted it as soon as I did. That day I met your father in the woods, I asked him to give you back-” She trailed off, unwilling or unable to continue. But Ghost thought he could guess what happened next. When Tristan had refused, she must’ve threatened to expose him. So he silenced her for good...

“Baine knew what Tristan did to you,” he thought aloud. “Helped him cover it up...”

Morwyn nodded, still staring at Alain. “And Livia?”

“She pretended not to. But a part of her must’ve known that Alain was Tristan’s son...”

“Liar!” Alain shouted again, his face mottled with rage.

Tendrils of mist reached out as though to soothe him. “Look in your heart, Alain. You know the truth.”

“The only thing I know is you’re a cold-blooded killer!”

Anger flashed across Morwyn’s face. The mist began roiling around her like a stormy sea. “Everything I’ve done, was so we could be together.”

“I would rather die than be with you!” Before anyone could stop him, Alain turned and ran into the bushes.

For moment, Ghost stared after him. Then he spotted the broken line of crystals.

“Run!” he cried to the others.

CHAPTER 17–FIRE AND BONE

Tendrils of mist shot out like vines, grabbing hold of them before they could move. Frost began to spread up their legs, locking them in place. Ghost looked on helplessly as his friends struggled, protected from the cold by his leather jerkin. The maiden swept forward, her dark hair undulating like the current of the mist.

Torben swung his axe at the frozen ground, but it would not budge. “Quick! The fire!” he roared.

Ghost reached into his robes, his hands shaking so badly he could barely open the jar. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the maiden cross the line of salt. Then the lid was off and he spilled its contents into the fire. It let out a long hiss as though doused with water.

Morwyn paused for a moment, her eyes growing wide. Then she furled the mist around her like a cloak, vanishing into its murky folds.

There was a gasp next to Ghost as Nella broke free of the frost, collapsing onto her

hands and knees.

“Nella!” Ghost ran to the girl, brushing ice crystals off her back.

“I’m all right.”

“T-that was close,” Angus stuttered.

“Too close,” Torben said, pulling the youth to his feet. “Ghost, take Angus and Nella to the cottage – it’s the closest. I’ll go find the boy...” He headed off into the trees without waiting for a response. Ghost stared after him blankly for a moment; in all off the confusion he had forgotten about Alain. A snort from Burr brought him back to the present. The dog shook his coat, dislodging the layer of white powder.

“Come on,” he said to the others and began the climb up the hill.

Inside the cottage, Ghost fumbled to start a fire in the empty hearth. They had closed all of the shutters in case someone was watching in the night. By the time anyone would find signs of their occupation, they would hopefully be long gone. When the fire was going, they huddled together to drive out the lingering chill. Nella managed to scrounge up some hard cheese and pickled vegetables from the pantry, which they ate as they waited for the others to return.

“What’s taking them so long?” she asked after a while. “Surely Alain could not have gotten that far.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Torben will find him...”

“I don’t blame him for running,” Angus said, suppressing a shiver.

Ghost nodded in silent agreement. It must’ve been a terrible shock, finding out who his birth mother really was... And what she was capable of.

“What I still don’t get,” Nella began, “is why she is so bent on destroying the whole

village. Tristan is dead. Surely, that's enough?"

"They're the reason they couldn't be together," Ghost said quietly. "The villagers would've shunned her for having a child out of wedlock. Their small-mindedness is what made her give up him up – and what made Tristan silence her. They're all guilty, in her eyes..."

He looked up to find Nella staring at him with something like pity in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but Burr gave a bark and leapt to his feet. Torben appeared in the door, his arm around Alain's waist. The boy's face looked even paler than usual and he was leaning on the older man.

"What happened?" Ghost asked.

"Fell over a tree root. Hurt my ankle," Alain mumbled. Angus went to help him into a chair, as Nella fetched her medicine kit.

While the others were busy, Torben took Ghost aside. "What do we do now?" he asked in a hushed tone.

Ghost had thought about this while they were waiting and had reached only one possible conclusion. "We need to burn the bones."

Torben nodded as though he had expected as much. "Do you know where she's buried?"

Ghost shook his head. "Somewhere in the woods. There is a binding - but I will need something of her. An old hairbrush or something like that. How we'll get it, though, I don't know..."

"We'll find a way." Torben slapped Ghost on the back. "Now get some rest. It's been a long day."

The Northman took the first watch by the door, while the rest of them curled up by the hearth. Ghost made a pallet of straw for the injured Alain, who lay down without thanking him. He did not blame him for being sullen, though. He imagined what the boy must be feeling, finding out what his father had done. And his mother... A cold-blooded killer, he had called her. But Ghost wasn't sure if that was completely true. Surely Tristan had deserved to be punished for what he did? Even Baine had known, and helped to cover it up. He would be angry, too... Livia, however, was a different matter. Sure, she was haughty and cold but she had loved her son, despite her faults.

Ghost turned on his side to look at Alain. The boy was lying on his back, staring up at the thatched ceiling. He could see it now, the resemblance between the two. It was obvious in hindsight that he belonged to Morwyn...

Ghost sat up so quickly that he dislodged Burr from his legs. Alain gave him a quizzical look but didn't comment as he padded over to where Torben kept watch by the door.

"I know how to do the binding," he whispered.

#

The next morning they cleared out early, in case the cottage was still being watched. Alain reluctantly agreed to let Torben carry him on his back. Ghost watched the boy surreptitiously as they made the trek back through the trees. His shock seemed to have hardened into anger overnight and he looked more like Tristan's son than ever. Angus left them at the cave, lest his continued absence raise suspicions. Ghost was sad to part with Burr again, but the dog would not be any help for what lay ahead.

The night before, Torben and Ghost had come up with a plan. He had filled Nella in

on the way over - all that was left was to convince Alain. His chance came when the others went to fetch water, leaving him alone with the injured boy.

“How is the ankle?” he asked.

Alain shrugged. “As long as I stay off it, it should be fine...”

“Good.”

“I’m sorry,” he said glumly. “For running away like that.”

“It’s fine. I understand-”

“It was stupid thing to do. Breaking the circle...”

“We got away all right.”

Alain nodded. “Torben told me what you did. With the rosemary and the fire...” he broke off. “Does it mean - is she - gone?”

“For now. But she’ll be back.”

“Then it was all for nothing,” the boy said bitterly.

“Not entirely.”

Something in Ghost’s voice made him look up. “Why?”

“She might’ve handed us the key to defeat her.” Ghost quickly explained about the binding to find the bones. “So by telling us you were her son, she inadvertently handed us a piece of her.”

Alain did not respond, staring off into the distance.

“I understand if you no longer want to be a part of this. She is your mother...”

“She is *not* my mother,” the boy snapped. He took a deep breath, trying to reign in his anger. “If I don’t, more people will get hurt - you heard her. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

By the time the others returned, Ghost already had a fire going. He had taken the necessary supplies from Maeve's stores that morning - mugwort to aid his vision and vervain for protection. There was only one ingredient missing...

Nella approached Alain with a pair of scissors and he reluctantly surrendered a lock of black hair. Ghost tossed it in the fire, crinkling his nose at the smell. He inhaled deeper, staring into the heart of the flames...

Blink.

Suddenly he wasn't sitting anymore, but standing in the middle of a woodland hollow. A small ridge rose to one side, flanked by a circle of trees. An icy breeze shivered through them, sending the leaves crackling.

Blink.

Then he was back in the cave, staring at the crackling flames.

"I know where it is!" he said.

#

Alain insisted on going with them, despite his swollen ankle. Injured or not, Ghost didn't think it was a good idea for him to come.

"Are you sure you want to see-" he asked, but the boy cut him off.

"I'm coming," he said firmly. Ghost turned to Nella, who crossed her arms.

"Don't you start on me, too," she warned.

"But it's going to be dangerous-"

"I have my aunt's necklace. I'll be protected."

"It's an unnecessary risk. We don't need four people..."

The girl stuck out her chin. "I'm going to end what I started."

So all four of them set off, Torben helping Alain along. The going was slow and it was dusk by the time they reached the spot. Alain had to be helped down the ridge and into the small clearing. The hollow was just as Ghost remembered it: Tall trees loomed on all sides like relatives around a sick bed.

He saw Alain's face flood with recognition. "I know this place..." he said. Ghost wondered how many unwitting travellers had passed it over the years, and suppressed a shudder.

Torben surveyed the clearing. "Where is the spot?"

Ghost pointed to the base of a particularly mournful-looking yew. Torben began to dig, using the back of his axe like a pick to break the soil. Nella and Ghost stuck their torches in the ground, before kneeling to help him dig. The earth was hard from recent cold and their progress was painfully slow.

Then Ghost spotted something that wasn't soil. Something woven and coarse like a piece of material. Nella stopped, too.

They had found her.

They proceeded with caution, clearing the outer layer of dirt around the shroud. Alain stared at the emerging form with a look of horror on his face. Ghost didn't blame him - what lay inside the parcel was too terrible to imagine...

"We'll need fuel to burn the body," Torben said, jolting Ghost back to the present.

They began to gather all of the dead leaves and twigs they could find in the clearing. When the grave was filled, Ghost removed the pouch of salt from his cloak. He poured some into his hand, then held out the bag out for the others to take.

They waited for Alain to begin the chant, but the boy was unwilling or unable to take

the lead.

Ghost stepped forward instead. “We release you, Morwyn of Riverborne. Go into the Beyond.”

The others joined in, their whispers forming a disjointed song as they moved around the pyre. When the circle was complete, they broke off one by one like the echoes of a chime. There was utter silence.

“But what if I don’t want to go?” said a voice behind them.

#

The maiden was standing in the shadows at the edge of the trees. She had abandoned any pretence of being human, her skin glowing translucently like sunlight through water. Ghost stared, caught off guard by her sudden appearance.

“How...?” he asked.

Torben reached for his axe, but the weapon flew out of his hand. There was a crack like lighting and Ghost was tackled to the floor, just as the canopy came crashing down above them. A large branch hit Nella and Torben, knocking them to the ground.

Ghost scrambled to his feet but the maiden was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did she go?” he asked, spinning around.

Alain rose shakily next to him. “I don’t know.”

“The fire!” Ghost said suddenly. But before they could move, a wind gusted through the clearing, extinguishing their torches. Ghost blinked at the sudden darkness. Then he remembered the kindling kit inside his cloak. With shaking hands, he opened the tin box and took out the piece of flint.

“Watch out!” Alain cried. There was a flash of white and then the maiden moved

through the boy like mist. He collapsed to the ground, shaking uncontrollably. The mist formed a column, that materialised into the shape of Morwyn. She knelt over the prone figure of Alain, a tender look on her diaphanous features.

“There there,” she said, stroking his forehead. “You’ll be with me soon...”

Frost spread from her fingers, his skin becoming white and glittering like her own.

“Come on,” Ghost muttered as he struck the flint on the edge of his dagger. But the sparks wouldn't come. Behind him, Alain's breath rattled once and then there was silence.

“Come on!”

The maiden raised her head, just as sparks exploded from the end of his blade. Twigs began to smoke as the fire ignited.

“No!” the maiden screamed. Wind rushed forward again, but it only fanned the flames higher. They leapt across the pyre of leaves and twigs, consuming it in seconds.

“No!” Morwyn cried. She clawed at her face, which had begun to darken like smoke. As the flames burned higher, flakes of skin began to peel off, until all that remained of her was a pile of smoking ashes on the forest floor.

CHAPTER 18–FLIGHT

Nella was the first to stir, rising shakily to her feet. Ghost rushed forward to steady her.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“I think so...”

There was a gasp behind them as Alain came to, heaving as though he had been under water. He looked around wildly. “W-what happened? Where’s-”

“Gone,” Ghost said. He looked at the fire behind him, still burning brightly.

Alain followed his gaze. “Good.” He turned back to them, his face expressionless.

“You’d best see to your friend.”

As they heaved the branch off Torben, he began to stir. He tried to sit up in his confusion, but Nella pushed him back down. Only when she was satisfied that nothing was broken did she allow him to move. He had nasty bump on his head where he had hit it on a rock falling down. It must’ve hurt badly, but he insisted they stay until the fire had died out.

“You can never be too careful with these things...”

The moon had risen high in the sky by the time they finally returned to the cave.

Ghost was exhausted but felt too alert to sleep. Nella still looked shaky so he offered to make the draught for Torben. The injured man fell asleep soon after, but not before making Ghost promise to take the first watch. Alain was already sitting in the mouth of the cave, staring out into the dark beyond.

He didn't look up when Ghost went to sit across from him.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine. Just cold."

"I meant-"

"I know what you meant-" Alain snapped. "Sorry," he apologised a moment later.

"It's all right. I understand."

The boy looked a bit lost now that his quest for vengeance had come to an end. As though his anger had been the only thing keeping him going after his parents' deaths.

"What will you do now?" Ghost asked softly. "Where will you go?"

"I have family in Topsfield, on my mother's side. I suppose I'll go and stay with them..."

"You could stay here," Ghost ventured. Surely someone would take in the wealthy orphaned boy? It seemed unfair that he should lose both his parents and his home at the same time.

"So could you." Alain looked at him, a question in his eyes.

Ghost turned away to face the darkness. "I gave my word," he said. But the truth was that neither of them really belonged there anymore. "Besides, I think I've got a taste for this bone witch business now. What with the digging up of bodies, and being chased through the woods. And to think, I wanted to be a forester..."

Alain's mouth twitched up at the corner. "At least it won't be dull."

Ghost smiled back at him. As he turned, he found Nella watching them silently from a distance. He excused himself and walked over to where she was sitting by the fire. Up close, her features looked unusually pale in the orange light.

"You alright, Nella?" he asked. "You don't look well."

"I am well. Why wouldn't I be?" She smiled widely, as though trying to reassure him.

Ghost frowned. "You just don't seem like yourself."

"It's been a long day. We are all tired... Why don't you sleep - I'll take the first watch."

Ghost sank down onto the rock next to her. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep," he confessed.

"Why?" she asked, her eyes searching his face. "Morwyn is gone now."

"I know." He gave a little shiver and pulled his cloak tighter. Something rattled inside his pocket, shaking loose a memory. "I almost forgot!" he said. "I picked this up for you in the woods." He held out Maeve's necklace of nails. "It must've come off in the fray."

Nella flinched back from his hand, but quickly recovered. She smiled, white teeth flashing in the dark. "You keep it. It will bring you good luck."

Ghost gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I don't need it. I have my dagger, remember?" He held it out to her and she recoiled again. "Nella, what's wrong?"

"I don't want it!"

"But your aunt gave it to you-"

"I said I don't want it!" she snarled, jumping to her feet.

"What's going on?" Alain asked from the mouth of the cave. Nella backed away a

few steps, deeper into the chamber. “Ghost?”

But he was looking at Nella. There was a strange expression on her face, which he had never seen before. Feral, almost, like a wild animal caught in a snare...

“Nella doesn’t want her aunt’s necklace anymore,” he said without taking his eyes off the girl.

“Why?” Alain asked, approaching from behind him.

“Because it’s made of iron,” Ghost said. “And iron *burns*!” At the last word, he lunged for the girl, but she was too quick and dodged his arms. Alain tried to head her off on the other side - and she leaped through the fire. She rolled and landed in a crouch by the entrance like a mountain cat. She gave a final, triumphant look over her shoulder. Then she was gone - out of the cave and into the night.

#

Ghost and Alain ran after in pursuit, but there was no sign of the girl outside. It was as if the forest had swallowed her whole.

“Nella!” Ghost screamed in desperation.

“It’s no use,” Alain said, gently. “She’s gone.”

“We have to find her!”

Torben emerged from the cave, rubbing his eyes. “What’s happened?”

“Nella! I think she’s been possessed...”

The man looked instantly alert. “Why do you say that?”

“I wanted to give her her aunt’s iron necklace back, but she refused to touch it. When I confronted her, she leaped through the fire and ran off-”

Torben closed his eyes, standing very still. A shudder passed through his body like the

wind blowing through a tree. When his eyes opened again, they were fixed in front of him.

“This way,” he said and headed off into the trees.

Torben set a swift pace, pausing only occasionally to sniff at a trunk or study the ground. They were slowed down by Alain’s injured foot, but the boy did his best to keep up. Ghost thought they were heading in the direction of the village, though it was hard to tell in the dark. Soon enough, the trees opened up to reveal the river, glinting serenely in the moonlight.

Torben splashed into the calve-high water. “Her scent ends here,” he said. “She could’ve gone either way.”

“Or straight ahead - to the village,” Alain added.

“We’ll have to split up. Alain, you head to the village. Go get Angus and his mother and any friends you can trust. Arm yourselves with iron. We need to find her before she hurts anyone else - or herself...”

“What do we do if we find her?”

“Capture her, if possible. But be careful - she’ll be very strong.”

The boy limped away obediently to go find an easier crossing up the river.

“And me?” Ghost asked.

“You head downstream.” Torben reached into his cloak and removed what looked like a hunting horn from inside. “Call if you find her - I’ll come as fast as I can.” Ghost took the horn and hung it around his neck. He watched the warrior run off and then turned to go the opposite way.

Ghost followed the river, thinking the maiden would use the water to mask her trail. He started out at a run, but soon became winded and slowed his pace. It was no use - he’d

never catch up with her. If she had come this way at all...

Where would she have gone? Back to the village? Probably not, as she'd most likely get caught there. Upstream? Nothing but the mountains lay that way. Perhaps she would hide and bide her time... Or did she go downstream, to leave the valley? Not likely. Not until she had achieved her goal...

Ghost rounded a bend in the river and a light suddenly appeared from behind the trees. On the opposite bank stood a small cabin. Orange light spilled from the open shutters into the water below. As he watched, a shadow appeared in the window. It looked like the profile of a woman with long hair. The figure vanished as quickly as she appeared, followed by a scream. Ghost didn't pause to think - he drew his dagger and ran straight towards the sound.

#

As Ghost pushed on the front door, it banged open. Inside was a single, shabby room with a dirt floor and a fire pit in the centre. Pressed up against the furthest wall was Fineas, his usually ruddy face drained of colour. Before him stood Nella, her one hand wrapped around his throat. The man looked at Ghost, his eyes wide with fear. *Help me*, he seemed to say.

"Nella!"

The girl turned slowly to look over her shoulder. Her red hair had escaped its usual braid and framed her face in a halo of fire. But her eyes were cold and calculating - the maiden's eyes.

"Hello, Ghost," she said. Before he could react, the dagger flew out of his hand and landed with a clatter on the floor. Behind her Fineas was still trying to break, but she was too strong.

“Nella, stop!”

“Why should I?” she asked, turning back to the man.

“That’s your father, Nella,” Ghost said, repeating her name. Maybe if he said it enough times she would remember herself.

The maiden gave a cold smile with Nella’s mouth. “I know.” She looked at the man, who had stopped trying to struggle. “Pathetic isn’t he? She hates him, for abandoning her... Wants me to go through with it.”

“No!”

“So much anger... it’s what opened her up to me.”

“Liar!” Ghost bellowed. “She wasn’t wearing any iron. That’s the only reason you could touch her. She’s nothing like you...”

But the maiden continued. “I sense it in you, too. The hatred. Part of you wants me to do it... Wants me to end them all.”

“No!”

“You will get your wish.” She turned back to Fineas to finish what she started.

Ghost looked around frantically but his dagger was nowhere in sight. Then he remembered the horn that Torben had given him. Out of desperation, he pressed it to his lips and blew. A low note escaped, echoing through the room until walls seem to shake with it.

The maiden let go of Fineas and clasped her hands over her ears. Freed from her grip, the man scrambled past Ghost and out the waiting door. Then it was just the two of them left.

Ghost lowered the horn to draw breath - and she leaped at him, tackling him to the ground. They rolled across the floor, the girl landing on top of him. Ghost tried to throw her off with his hips, but she had him pinned with her unnatural strength.

She laughed as he struggled. "You cannot win boy."

"Neither can you," he said. "Alain will never accept you as his mother!"

The smile vanished from her face. "Liar!"

"It's true. He hates you as much as Nella hates her father - more even!"

Hands closed around his throat, cutting off his air supply. Rage contorted her features - Nella's features... Ghost felt around desperately for something - anything - to fend her off. Then his hand closed around something warm and metallic. Tears sprang into his eyes. *Sorry Nella*, he thought. Then he brought the poker up. There was a hiss as the tip of the poker met flesh.

Nella's eyes went wide for a moment in surprise, then they rolled back in her head. Her grip on his neck slackened as her whole body went limp. She fell to the side, twitching as though trying throw something off. But something was being shaken loose: smoke rose from her body, particles gathering above her in a dark cloud. It hovered over her for a moment, then it descended on Ghost before he could roll away.

He felt it pass through him like a chill mist. Then it was inside of him, inside his bones, and he could not think for the aching cold. He cried out and something laughed inside of him, everywhere and nowhere at once.

"You cannot escape me, Ghost. I see your heart. So much anger hidden deep inside..."

"No!" he wanted to shout, but his lips wouldn't move.

"I own you now. Together, we will end them all."

"No!" but his anger only seemed to make her stronger. She began to swell inside him, pulsing like a second black heart.

“There is no use resisting. I am too strong for you.”

Ghost struggled to remain in control. He had to fight it! But it was futile. He felt the cold spreading through him like ice in his veins. Is this what it felt like to be a skin witch? he wondered idly as his mind drifted. Sharing your body with another consciousness... How did they stay in control? And then Torben’s words came to him. *You hold on to the things that make you human. Sympathy, compassion, love...*

With the last of his strength, Ghost turned to look at Nella. She had stopped twitching, lying pale and still. She looked so peaceful, he could imagined her asleep at home. He thought of winter, when they would all sleep down by the hearth.

The cold stopped.

He imagined sitting by the fire, Nella begging her aunt to tell another story.

No! the voice said. The cold began to retreat.

He thought of Elaine, bringing them a bottle of cider. Of Angus, shy behind his mother’s skirts. Angus, who had hidden them. Who had come back to help them even after they’d run away. And Torben, who came to help even though he didn’t need to. And Alain, who had saved him from that falling branch. Who had the hands of musician, not a blacksmith...

No, no, no, no, no!

The cries became frantic, but Ghost barely registered it. He was filled with warmth, his heart swelling, growing too big for his chest to contain.

He saw Morwyn then, as he had seen her that first night. Under the tree, pale and alone. Hiding from the storm. She looked up at him in confusion.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re lost,” he replied.

“It looks familiar...”

“It was your home once. But it isn’t anymore.”

“How do I go back?” she asked, pain in her eyes.

“Let go,” he said simply.

“Show me.”

Ghost went to lie down next to her on the forest floor. It was surprisingly soft. She lay back down next to him. “Now close your eyes and-”

“Let go,” she breathed.

Ghost watched as her shape began to glow, growing bright as the moon. He closed his eyes against the blinding light. When he opened them again, she was gone. All that remained was a faint shimmer like dust in a sunbeam. Then it was gone too and Ghost was left alone beneath the tree, but he wasn’t afraid anymore. He lay back down on the ground. A feeling of peace came over him and he closed his eyes, surrendering to it.

CHAPTER 19—THE TRIAL

Ghost's first impression when he woke was of blinding whiteness: the white of the walls of the room he lay in, the white of the linen on his bed, the white of the light spilling through the window onto his feet. A familiar silhouette sat there, framed by the morning sun.

"W-where am I?"

"You're at the Inn," Maeve said.

Slowly, he sat up and looked around. Nella was lying in the bed next to him, a bandage on her left arm. She looked pale, but her breathing was calm and even.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Fine, fine."

"How did we get here?"

"After he escaped, Fineas came to get me."

Ghost sat back in surprise. He thought the man had run away to save his own hide.

“Didn’t anyone try to stop you?” he asked.

The witch smiled. “Croft did, so we locked him in the cellar. No one else tried to interfere.”

“Surely they must know now that you weren’t behind the attacks? You would never hurt Nella or me...”

Maeve’s expression grew serious. “I told Fineas it was best not to mention Nella’s part in the events of last night. As far as the village knows, it was Morwyn who attacked you.”

“He’s willing to go along with it?”

“Guilt is a very powerful emotion...”

Ghost nodded, thinking of how Fineas had let Nella go at the crossing. His eyes fell on the sleeping girl. “What I still don’t understand is how she managed to possess Nella, after we had burnt her bones.”

“I talked to Torben last night, who knows something of these matters. He thinks that when Morwyn’s tether to this world was destroyed, her essence latched onto Nella’s.”

“But why her?”

“The rest of you were protected by the iron you wore. But it is my belief that the telling fire weakened her psychically. After the visions, she was more vulnerable to that kind of attack.”

“Why could I resist the maiden?” Ghost asked softly

“You would know that better than me.”

“Torben said that we need to hold on to what makes us human...”

Maeve’s brows rose. “And that is?”

“Love, sympathy, compassion...”

For moment a Maeve look surprised and then she smiled. “Here I thought it was the ability to walk on two feet.”

She got up slowly as if putting action to words. “You should rest now. I’ll send Elaine up with a tray later.”

It didn’t take long for Ghost to fall asleep again. He woke up later that day to find Nella looking at him.

“Nella! You’re awake.”

“How long was I out?” she asked in creaky voice, which told him she had also just woken up.

He turned to look out the window. By the position of the sun, he guessed it was late afternoon. “About a day?”

The girl nodded. “Do you remember what happened?” he asked tentatively.

Nella looked up, and there were tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry Ghost! I never meant to hurt you.”

“It wasn’t you. Besides, you’re the one with the bandage.” He smiled, to show her he wasn’t angry.

Nella looked down at her arm. “At least I’ll have something to remember you by,” she said, smiling through her tears.

Hearing they were up, Elaine soon brought a pair of dinner trays to the room. After the meal, there was a knock on the door. It was Torben and - to Ghost’s surprise - Alain. The boy hung back awkwardly as Torben came inside.

“I thought you’d gone to Topsfield!” Ghost said, surprised.

“We’re leaving tomorrow. I wanted to see that you were all right first.”

Ghost looked past him at Alain, who nodded wordlessly. A greeting but also an acknowledgement of gratitude. He nodded back at him.

“You leaving too?” he asked.

“I’m going with Torben.”

“We’ll be sorry to see you go,” Nella said and the boy flushed. It was the first time Ghost had really seen him look embarrassed.

Elaine showed up again to clear the trays and shooed the pair away. “The poor things need their rest. They’ve been through alot.”

#

But Torben and Alain didn’t leave the next morning as planned. As they were preparing to go, word arrived that the magistrate had been seen coming down the River Road. Angus came running into the kitchen with the news just as Nella and Ghost finished breakfast. Word spread through the village like wildfire and, by the time the magistrate arrived, the street was filled with curious onlookers. Dressed in black from head to foot, he wore a gold medallion around his shoulders that marked him as a Justice of the Peace. He was younger than Ghost expected, his brown hair only silvered at the temples. His grey eyes took in the gathered crowd but seemed unconcerned.

Behind him, on a smaller horse, was a young man of around Angus’s age. He had the same smooth, brown complexion as Tamira, his wiry black hair shaved short. His identical black robes marked him as the magistrate’s clerk. Unlike his master, though, he looked around with open interest. Some of the younger women returned his curiosity.

The pair dismounted and Angus scrambled forward to take their horses. The

magistrate removed his riding gloves, and began to instruct the youth on how to care for his horse. As they spoke, the crowd before him parted and a familiar white-haired man stepped forward. The magistrate continued to talk to Angus, ignoring the new arrival.

“We’ll need two rooms-”

The old man cleared his throat.

“And hot baths- ”

He cleared his throat again and the magistrate finally seemed to notice him. “Yes?” he asked.

“My Lord, my name is Tobias Catcher. I’m the head of the Village Council. It was I who sent for you, to preside over the trial-”

“Yes, yes. We’ll get to that,” the magistrate said with a wave of his hand. “First, I need to eat or else there’ll be another murder.”

The old man looked shocked, but behind him the clerk grinned. He was probably used to his master’s brusque manners.

“This way, my Lord,” Elaine stepped forward.

“Excellent.”

As they approached the inn, the magistrate spotted Torben standing by the door. “The Bear of the North!” he exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here, in the middle of nowhere?”

“It’s a long story...”

“Come tell it to me over a hot meal.” The magistrate lowered his voice to a conspiratory level. “Do you still have any of that nettle wine?”

“I’m sure I can find some.”

“Good man...”

#

“How do you think they know each other?” Ghost wondered aloud. They were in the kitchen, helping Elaine prepare the magistrate’s meal.

“Torben is a bounty hunter. He must’ve had business in Highgard before,” Nella said wisely.

The door opened and Angus came through, bearing an empty platter. “They want more wine,” he told his mother.

“What are they talking about?” Nella asked as Elaine disappeared into the cellar.

“I’m not sure. Torben was doing most of the talking...”

“I hope he is making a case for my aunt.” Nella said, biting her lip.

Lunch was a long and elaborate affair. The platter of savory tarts was followed by roast chicken with potatoes and leeks. Angus kept running back and forth, clearing plates and pouring drink. Nella and Ghost questioned him between courses but it seems the party were careful not to not to say anything in front of him. When he went to clear dessert, he was away for an inordinately long time. He returned looking sweaty and shaken.

“The Lord asked to see you,” he said before Ghost could interrogate him.

“Me?” Ghost asked, taken aback.

“Both of you.”

Nella and Ghost exchanged a frightened look before following the youth up the stairs. He led them to a room at the end of the second-floor corridor.

Angus knocked once, and the voices fell quiet on the other side. The youth pushed the door open a crack. “I have them here, m’lord.”

“The girl first,” came a voice from inside.

Ghost was left standing in the corridor by himself. He was reminded of the long wait before the Choosing, though he was even more nervous this time around. What if they didn’t believe him? Or worse, what if he said the wrong thing and got Maeve into even more trouble?

After what felt like an age, the door opened again. “Enter.”

The room had been transformed into a private dining room of sorts. A table and four chairs stood before a hearth with little room for anything else. It was warmer than the taproom, Ghost supposed, and free from any possible eavesdroppers. At a chair at the head of the table sat the magistrate. He had a cup of his wine in hand but his eyes were sharp. Nella stood in the corner, her hands clutching the front of her dress.

“This is the boy,” the Lord said. “Come closer, let me have look at you.” He surveyed Ghost, eyes taking in his pale features. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Almost a man, then. So you the understand gravity of charges against your mistress?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“The village council claims she is responsible for the death of three people. I’ve heard testimony from Torben, and your friend-” he nodded to Nella. “Now I’d like to hear from you.”

Ghost looked to the Northman, who bowed his head slightly. So he began the tale, starting with the night he met Morwyn and ending with Fineas’s cabin. He left out Nella’s flight through the forest, pretending they were out looking for the maiden when they found

her there. He explained how she had tried to possess him and how he had vanquished her instead. The clerk's quill scratched furiously as he spoke, keeping pace with his words.

When Ghost finished, the magistrate regarded him closely. "Your friend told the same story," he said, "Either you rehearsed it really well-

"We didn't!" Nella protested but he held up a hand.

"Or you're telling the truth. Personally, I'm inclined to believe the latter. But that remains to be seen."

He rung the bell on the table and Angus's head appeared in the door. "Fetch the man Fineas. And more of those tarts."

The youth returned ten minutes later with Fineas in tow. The man looked neater than Ghost had ever seen him. He was still unshaven, but wore clean clothes and for once he didn't reek of booze. Ghost suspected that Elaine had gotten hold of him. As he entered, his eyes went to Nella in the corner, then looked away quickly.

"I understand you witnessed the attack on these children?"

"Yes, m'lord. It happened at my cottage."

"What were they doing there at such an hour?"

"They came to warn me, my Lord. I live by myself, you see, and would've made an easy target. While they were there, the spirit of the maiden appeared."

The magistrate leaned forward in his chair. "What did she look like?"

"Beautiful, with long black hair," he said without blinking, and Ghost thought Maeve must've coached him in the lie. "And she had a sort of glow like starlight."

The Lord gestured for him to continue his story.

"Nella fainted from fright, so I ran."

“You just left her there?”

The man hung his head in what looked like genuine shame. “It was not my proudest moment, my Lord. I was scared, I didn’t know what to do...”

“But he came back,” Nella said softly from the corner.

Fineas didn’t look at her, but seemed to draw courage from her words. “I did. I went to the village to find Maeve. She was locked up, you see. I thought she would know what to do - being a witch and all. When we got back, I found the boy passed out next to Nella.”

“And the maiden was gone?”

“Like mist before the sun...”

“Thank you for your testimony. You may go.” Fineas gave a low bow before backing out of the door. He dared a last look at Nella before shutting it behind him.

“That was illuminating,” the magistrate rose, wiping crumbs from robes. “And now it is time for a nap, I think. We will continue presently.”

The Magistrate commenced with interviews later that afternoon, starting with the village council. Word spread through the village of what the judge was doing and many tried to get a peek through the inn’s windows. But Elaine had closed the taproom for the day. Ghost was restless, hanging around the landing in the hope of overhearing something.

The clerk finally popped his head out of the door. “Boy!” he called Ghost. “Tell the witch the Lord is ready for her.”

Maeve was being kept in one of the larger suites on the third floor. The guard at the door reluctantly moved aside to let Ghost pass. The old witch sat inside by the window, smoking her pipe.

“The judge asked to see you,” he said.

The witch temped out her pipe and put it in her pocket, before rising to her feet.

“Cheer up,” she said as she followed him down the stairs. “You look like you’re leading me to the gallows.”

But Ghost didn’t return her smile. “Aren’t you scared?” he asked.

“The only thing that scares me nowadays is the mirror.” They stopped at the end of the corridor and Maeve gave a firm knock. “Oh and Ghost,” she said as she gripped the doorknob. “Don’t tell Elaine about the pipe. She hates the smell...”

Ghost went to sit on the top of the stairs and Nella came to join him. “What do you think will happen to her?” the girl asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know. Should we make a telling fire?” he joked weakly.

Nella snorted but looked pensive. “If I had only listened to you... None of this would’ve happened.”

“It would’ve eventually,” he said. “The truth can’t stay buried forever.”

She still looked sad so he took her hand. They sat that way waiting for the verdict together.

#

Maeve did not emerge from the chamber for a long time. Nella and Ghost jumped up as the door finally opened. “Go find the village council, Jamil,” the magistrate was saying to his clerk. “Tell them I’m ready to deliver the sentence.”

The pair waited but the witch didn’t emerge, so they followed the clerk down the stairs. A crowd soon gathered in front of the inn as word spread the magistrate was ready to make a pronouncement. Ghost instantly spotted Judith’s orange head amongst the sea of brown. She tried to catch Nella’s attention but the girl ignored her. Instead, they went to stand

next to Elaine near the front of the crowd. The magistrate finally emerged from the door, Maeve and Torben coming up behind him. The Northman looked calm, but his hand hovered near his axe. The crowd seemed to notice too, and eyed him warily.

The magistrate had put his medallion back on and looked grave. He cleared his throat once and the chatter died down.

“I was called here to Riverborne, to judge the fate of Maeve Nettlewood, who stands accused of the death of three people. The village council believes that the unnatural nature of the deaths points to her guilt. However, they were unable to produce any witnesses or evidence linking her to the crimes.

In fact, witnesses have confirmed that she was locked up during the most recent death, as well as the attack on two children two nights ago. The children in question, as well as other credible witnesses - including victims' own son - have testified to her innocence. Therefore, I have no choice but to pronounce her innocent of all crimes.”

There was an uproar as the verdict of innocent was repeated. Some people looked happy, others surprised, others downright furious. The magistrate held up his hand and the noise died down again.

“Being a witch is not a crime, nor is it proof of a questionable character. A crime is to take justice into your own hands. We have one law and that is the Queen's Law, enforced by her ordained servants. So I warn you now, if I hear of any individuals who take it upon themselves to meet out justice, I will deal with them personally...”

Silence met his statement. Some craned their necks to look at the village council. Tobias Catcher was red in the face, trembling with outrage. “But if the witch didn't do it, then who did?” he asked.

There were cries of ‘yes!’ and the crowd looked to the judge.

“The village council was right about one thing - the deaths were supernatural. The culprit was the spirit of a former member of your village. A young woman by the name of Morwyn. She had a troubled history with the mayor that led her to destroy his family, and village, if she could. She would have succeeded, as well, if it wasn’t for bravery of these two children.” Ghost felt his face grow red as the crowd turned to look at him and Nella. “They figured out who was behind the attacks and stopped it for good.”

“I beg your pardon, my Lord,” Tobias began. “But I find that difficult to believe-”

“I don’t,” said a voice from the back of the crowd. It was Fineas. “I always knew the village council was a bunch of old fools. Maybe we should elect a child to be our new mayor.”

There were a few laughs and cries of ‘yes!’

Tobias turned even redder in the face but did not retort. The Magistrate struggled to hide his smile. “Any further objections? No?” He turned to Elaine. “What’s for dinner?” he asked as she escorted him back inside.

When the magistrate was gone, the crowd began to disperse. A gaggle of girls remained behind to talk to the handsome clerk. As they cleared away, Nella and Ghost ran to embrace Maeve. The old witch grumbled but didn’t stop them.

“I’m so relieved!” Nella sobbed as they broke free of the embrace.

“Thought I was done for?”

“Didn’t you?” Ghost asked.

She sucked on her teeth as though missing her pipe. “You have to believe good will triumph in the end,” she said at last. “Or else, what’s the point?”

EPILOGUE

Torben left the next day to deliver his message to Topsfield. Alain went with him, but Ghost remained behind. He would come for him on his journey back. Ghost was grateful for the extra time with Nella and maeve. He spent the first day helping the witch restore order to the cottage. After that, he and Nella spent most of their time down by the river with Burr. The water now took up most of the bank, the white stones no longer visible beneath.

It had begun to rain the one afternoon so they sought refuge under an overhanging willow. From there they watched the water flow down the valley, where it would join the Boundless River, flowing all the way to the sea.

Nella was clearly thinking along the same lines. "I would love to see the ocean... One day," she sighed wistfully.

"You will." Ghost put a hand in his pocket and felt it close around something cold.

“Before I forget - I still have your necklace!” He held it out expectantly.

Nella reached but took his hand instead, enclosing it in her fingers. “You keep it. As a reminder.”

Ghost knew she didn’t mean of their ordeal, but of her and Maeve. Of home.

He nodded quietly, overcome with emotion.

Days passed quickly until one morning saw Torben walking up the River Path. Burr barked as he spotted him coming around the bend.

“Burr!” Nella chastised him. “That’s Torben, you silly mutt.”

The man smiled at her admonishment. “You ready?” he asked Ghost.

Ghost nodded and went to fetch his pack from behind the front door. It had not taken long to gather all of his possessions together.

Maeve came around the cottage to see what the commotion was about. “It’s time,” she said.

Ghost nodded. He didn’t know what to say to the witch. How he would ever thank her for what she had done, what she had meant to him?

“Don’t look so grim boy. Sadness is for goodbyes.”

“Isn’t this goodbye?” he asked.

“Never.” She reached out and touched his jerkin, beneath which hung the necklace Nella had given him. He smiled at her, understanding.

Nella showed no such restraint and threw her arms around him in a tight embrace.

“I’ll miss you,” she said, her voice trembling with unshed tears.

“I’ll write. And I’ll visit. As often as I can.”

She released him just as abruptly, nodding. Maeve put her arm around her niece’s

shoulders in an uncharacteristic gesture of affection.

Ghost turned to Burr. “Come boy,” he said.

And together they walked down the river path, one last time.

END